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THE MAGAZINE OF TERROR

Vol. 2, No. 5
Fall 1987

ALAN RODGERS 6 *Introduction*

STORIES

ORSON SCOTT CARD 12 *Saving Grace*

RAMSEY CAMPBELL 28 *Rising Generation*

RICHARD CHRISTIAN MATHESON 34 *Wonderland*
AND WILLIAM RELLING JR.

RUDY MATIC 40 *Ask Not*

MARVIN KAYE 48 *Ghosts of Night and Morning*

PETER HEYRMAN 92 *An Eye for an Eye*

AMBROSE BIERCE 99 *The Boarded Window*

A. R. MORLAN 104 *Dear D.B. ...*

G. L. RAISOR 120 *The Accounting*

JAY SHECKLEY 145 *Megamouse*

DEAN WESLEY SMITH 149 *The Jukebox Man*

THOMAS WYLDE 157 *The Prize*

NOVELETTES

RUDYARD KIPLING 72 *The Strange Ride of
Morowbie Jukes*

PAUL DI FILIPPO 163 *Little Doors*

SERIAL

J. N. WILLIAMSON 124 *The Night Seasons, Part IV*

POETRY

TOM DISCH 66 *Two Poems*

NONFICTION

WILLIAM RELLING JR. 68 *Profile: Rudyard Kipling*

AL SARRANTONIO 185 *Books*

T.E.D. KLEIN 190 *Film*

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Ramsey Campbell's "Rising Generation" appeared in a British magazine, *World of Horror*, in 1975. This is the story's first North American publication. With the exception of "The Strange Ride of Morowbie Jukes" by Rudyard Kipling and "The Boarded Window" by Ambrose Bierce, all other stories in this issue of *Night Cry* are new and appear in these pages for the first time anywhere.



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Introduction: Where the Dead Do Not Die

by ALAN RODGERS

You've come to a place
where dark, unhuman eyes
stare out of summer faces.
Those eyes, we suspect,
are your own.

Strange things have been happening in the *Night Cry* offices lately. Walls have been shifting—relocating themselves of their own accord—and the atmosphere, always peculiar and electric, has had something fateful but uncertain about it.

More than once we've come back from lunch to find paper half-scrolled through our typewriters, covered to the margins with type. But the words (and the typing is made up of words, for there's a certain logic and pronounceability to it) are in no language we've ever seen or heard of. Some language we'd never have imagined, even in delirium. And whatever the messages are, they always seem to end abruptly, as though somehow our return had interrupted them.

Telephones have begun to ring at odd times—late in the evening, for instance, when no one should be calling—and when we answer them we only hear odd whistling and whirring sounds, as though a machine were trying to speak to us. Or perhaps



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something alive but not even remotely human, something that cannot speak with lips, as we do.

It makes us uneasy.

But then, fear is something we appreciate in the offices of *Night Cry*. We find it *adds* something to life.

In fact, for all that it makes us uneasy, the strangeness is something that excites our curiosity. Is that you, dear reader, trying to contact us from across some unknowable void? Are the alien noises that we hear you, trying to warn us of something? The end of the world, perhaps? Ragnarok, or Armageddon? Or is it only that you wish to speak to us, to communicate with us as we communicate with you?

If that is you out there, shifting our walls, battering our typewriters, and ringing our phones, we want you to know: we aren't afraid. We're listening. We're concerned for you.

Are you well? Do you need healing, perhaps? We've thought that perhaps some illness might be the problem. So we've included something *special* in this issue: Orson Scott Card's "Saving Grace"—a tale full of miracles and healing and many other things mysterious and frightening and wonderful. It may not heal you, in and of itself, but Scott Card *knows* something about wellness, and what he can tell you is something of great value.

But maybe it's something darker that you need.

Looking into the dark can be a powerful medicine for ailments of the soul; too easily the things we lock behind the doors of our spirits can creep silently through the cracks in the doorjambs, and twist our hearts and minds. Sometimes it's only by looking into the darkness that we can master it.

And there's darkness here, too—darkness enough to fill a thousand nights. Stories that explore the things that breed when you ignore your intuition—Ramsey Campbell's "Rising Generation," and "Wonderland" by Richard Christian Matheson and William Relling Jr.

Then there's Thomas Wylde's "The Prize" and Rudy Matic's "Ask Not," stories that concern the ultimate darkness: not just the end of our world, but what comes *after* the end.

But perhaps the most pivotal and powerful things we have to offer you are things that are already dead. Dead things, indeed, that do not die. Things like the unholy spirits that inhabit Aubrey House in Marvin Kaye's "Ghosts of Night and Morning." Or like

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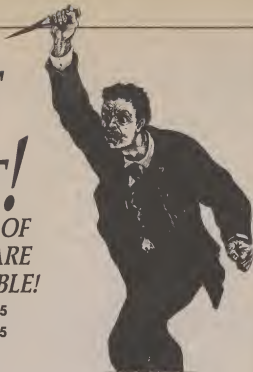
the inhabitants of the village in Rudyard Kipling's "The Strange Ride of Morowbie Jukes." And even the living death you'll find in Peter Heyrman's "An Eye for an Eye," and Ambrose Bierce's "The Boarded Window."

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Saving Grace

by ORSON SCOTT CARD

And he looked into her eyes, and lo!
when her gaze fell upon him
he did verily turn to stone,
for her visage was wondrous ugly.
Praise the Lord.

Mother came home depressed as hell with a bag full of groceries and a headache fit to make her hair turn to snakes. Billy, he knew when Mommy was like that, he could tell as soon as she grumped through the living room. But if she was full of hellfire, he had the light of heaven, and so he said, "Don't be sad, Mother, Jesus loves you."

Mother put the margarine into the fridge and wiped the graham cracker crumbs off the table and dumped them in the sink even though the disposal hadn't worked for years. "Billy," she said quietly, "you been saved again?"

"I only was just going to look inside."

"Ought to sue those bastards. Burn down their tent or something. Why can't they do their show from a studio like everybody else?"

"I felt my sins just weighing me down and then he reached out and Jesus come into my heart and I had to be baptized."

At the word *baptized*, Mommy slammed the kitchen counter. The mixing bowl bounced. "Not again, you damn near got pneumonia the last time!"

"This time I dried my hair."

"It isn't sanitary!"

"I was the first one in. Everybody was crying."

"Well, you just listen! I tell you not to go there, and I mean it! You look at me when I'm talking to you, young man."



Her irresistible fingers lifted up his chin. Billy felt like he was living in a Bible story. He could almost hear Bucky Fay himself telling the tale: And he looked into her eyes, and lo! when her gaze fell upon him he did verily turn to stone, and he could not move though he sorely feared that he might wet his pants, for her visage was wondrous ugly. Praise the Lord.

"Now you promise me you won't go into that tent anymore, ever, because you got no resistance at all, you just come straight home, you hear me?"

He could not move until at last she despaired and looked away, and then he found his voice and said, "What *else* am I supposed to do after school?"

Today was different from all the other times they had this argument: this time his mother leaned on the counter and sobbed into the waffle mix. Billy came and put his arm around her and leaned his head on her hip. She turned and held him close and said, "If that son-of-a-bitch hadn't left me you might've had some brothers and sisters to come home to." They made waffles together, and while Billy pried pieces of overcooked waffle out of the waffle iron with a bent table knife, he vowed that he would not cause his mother such distress again. The revival tent could flap its wings and lift up its microwave dish to take part in the largess of heaven, but Billy would look the other way for his mother's sake, for she had suffered enough.

Yet he couldn't keep his thoughts away from the tent, because when they were telling what was coming up soon they had said that Bucky Fay was coming. Bucky Fay, the healer of channel 49, who had been known to exorcise that demon cancer and cast out kidney stones in the name of the lord; Bucky Fay, who looked to Billy like the picture Mommy kept hidden in the back of her top drawer, the picture of his father, the son-of-a-bitch. Billy wanted to see the man with the healing hands, see him in the flesh.

"Mommy," he said. On TV the skinny people were praising Diet Pepsi.

"Mm?" Mommy didn't look up.

"I wish my foot was all twisted up so I couldn't walk."

Now she looked up. "My Lord, what for!"

"So Jesus could turn it around."

"Billy, that's disgusting."

"When the miracle goes through you, Mommy, it knocks you on the head and then you fall down and get all better. A little girl

with no arm got a new arm from God. They said so."

"Child, they've turned you superstitious."

"I wish I had a club foot, so Jesus would do a miracle on me."

God moves in mysterious ways, but this time he was pretty direct. Of all the half-assed wishes that got made and prayers that got said, Billy's got answered. Billy's mother was brooding about how the boy was going off the deep end. She decided she had to get him out doing things that normal kids do. The movie playing at the local family-oriented moviehouse was the latest go-round of *Pollyanna*. They went and watched and Billy learned a lesson. Billy saw how *good* this little girl was, and how preachers liked her, and first thing you know he was up on the roof, figuring out how to fall off just right so you smash your legs but don't break your back.

Never did get it right. Broke his back, clean as could be, spinal cord severed just below the shoulders, and there he was in a wheelchair, wearing diapers and pissing into a plastic bag. In the hospital he watched TV, a religious station that had God's chosen servants on all day, praising and praying and saving. And they had Bucky Fay himself, praise the Lord, Bucky Fay himself making the deaf to hear and the arthritic to move around and the audience to be generous, and there sat Billy, more excited than he had ever been before, because now he was ripe and ready for a miracle.

"Not a chance in the world," his mother said. "By God I'm going to get you uncrazy, and the last place I'm going to take you is anywhere in earshot of those lying cheating hypocritical so-called healers."

But there's not many people in the world can say no more than two or three times to a paralyzed kid in a wheelchair, especially if he's crying, and besides, Mommy thought, maybe there's something *to* faith. Lord knows the boy's got *that*, even if he doesn't have a single nerve in his legs. And if there's even a chance of maybe giving him back some of his body, what harm can it do?

Once inside the tent, of course, she thought of other things. What if it *is* a fraud, which of course it is, and what happens when the boy finds out? What then? So she whispered to him, "Billy, now don't go expecting too much."

"I'm not." Just a miracle, that's all. They do them all the time, Mommy.

"I just don't want you to be disappointed when nothing happens."

"I won't be disappointed, Mommy." No. He'll fix me right up.

And then the nice lady leaned over and asked, "You here to be healed?"

Billy only nodded, recognizing her as Bucky Fay's helper lady who always said "Oh, my sweet Lord Jesus you're so kind" when people got healed, said it in a way that made your spine tingle. She was wearing a lot of makeup. Billy could see she had a moustache with makeup really packed onto it. He wondered if she was really secretly a man as she wheeled him up to the front. But why would a man wear a dress? He was wondering about that as she got him in place, lined up with the other wheelchair people on the front row.

A man came along and knelt down in front of him. Billy got ready to pray, but the man just talked normal, so Billy opened his eyes. "Now this one's going on TV," the man said, "and for the TV show we need you to be real careful, son. Don't say anything unless Bucky asks you a direct question, and then you just tell him real quick. Like when he asks you how come you got in a wheelchair, what'll you tell him?"

"I'll say—I'll say—"

"Now don't go freezing up on him, or it'll look real bad. This is on TV, remember. Now you just tell me how come you got in a wheelchair."

"So I could get healed by the power of Jesus."

The man looked at him a moment, and then he said, "Sure. I guess you'll do just fine. Now when it's all over, and you're healed, I'll be right there, holding you by the arm. Now don't say Thank the Lord right off. You wait till I squeeze your arm, and then you say it. Okay?"

"Okay."

"For the TV, you know."

"Yeah."

"Don't be nervous."

"I won't."

The man went away but he was back in just a second looking worried. "You can feel things in your arms, can't you?"

Billy lifted his arms and waved them up and down. "My arms are just fine." The man nodded and went away again.

There was nothing to do but watch, then, and Billy watched, but he didn't see much. On the TV, all you could see was Bucky Fay, but here the camera guys kept getting in front of him, and people were going back and forth all during the praising time and

the support this ministry time so Billy could hardly keep track of what was going on. Till the man who talked to him came over to him again, and this time a younger guy was with him, and they lifted Billy out of his chair and carried him over toward where the lights were so bright, and the cameras were turned toward him, and Bucky Fay was saying, "And now who is first, thanks be to the Lord? Are you that righteous young man who the devil has cursed to be a homophiliac? Come here, boy! God's going to give you a blood transfusion from the hemoglobin of the Holy Spirit!"

Billy didn't know what to do. If he said anything before Bucky Fay asked him a question, the man would be mad, but what good would it do if Bucky Fay ordered up the wrong miracle? But then he saw how the man who had talked to him turned his face away from the camera and mouthed, "Paralyzed," and Bucky Fay caught it and went right on, saying "Do you think the Saviour is worried? Paralyzed you are, too, completely helpless, and yet when the miracle comes into your body, do you think the Holy Spirit needs the doctors' diagnosis? No, praise the Lord, the Holy Spirit goes all through you, hunting down every place where the devil has hurt you, where the devil that great serpent has *poisoned* you, where the devil that mighty dragon has thought he could *destroy* you—boy, are you saved?"

It was a direct question. "Uh huh."

"Has the Lord come to you in the waters of baptism and washed away your sins and made you clean?"

Billy wasn't sure what that all meant, but after a second the man squeezed his arm, and so Billy said, "Thank the Lord."

"What the baptism did to the outside of your body, the miracle will do to the inside of your body. Do you believe that Jesus can heal you?"

Billy nodded.

"Oh, be not ashamed, little child. Speak so all the millions of our television friends can hear you. Can Jesus heal you?"

"Yes! I know he can!"

Bucky Fay smiled, and his face went holy; he spat on his hands, clapped twice, and then slapped Billy in the forehead, splashing spit all over his face. Just that very second the two men holding him sort of half-dropped him, and as he clutched forward with his hands he realized that all those times when people seemed to be overcome by the Holy Spirit, they were just getting *dropped*, but that was probably part of the miracle. They got him down on

the floor and Bucky Fay went on talking about the Lord knowing the pure in heart, and then the two men picked him up and this time stood him on his legs. Billy couldn't feel a thing, but he did know that he was standing. They were helping him balance, but his weight was on his legs, and the miracle had worked. He almost praised God right then, but he remembered in time, and waited.

"I bet you feel a little weak, don't you," said Bucky Fay.

Was that a direct question? Billy wasn't sure, so he just nodded his head.

"When the Holy Spirit went through the Apostle Paul, didn't he lie upon the ground? Already you are able to stand upon your legs, and after a good night's sleep, when your body has strengthened itself after being inhabited by the Spirit of the Lord, you'll be restored to your whole self, good as new!"

Then the man squeezed Billy's arm. "Praise the Lord," Billy said. But that was wrong—it was supposed to be thank the Lord, and so he said it even louder, "Thank the Lord."

And now with the cameras on him, the two men holding him worked the real miracle, for they turned him and leaned him forward, and pulled him along back to the wheelchair. As they pulled him, they rocked him back and forth, and under him Billy could hear his shoes scuffing the ground, left, right, left, right, just as if he was walking. But he wasn't walking. He couldn't feel a thing. And then he knew. All those miracles, all those walking people—they had men beside them, leaning them left, leaning them right, making their legs fall forward, just like dolls, just like dummies, real dummies. And Billy cried. They got the camera real close to him then, to show the tears streaking down his face. The crowd applauded and praised.

"He's new at walking," Bucky Fay shouted into the microphone. "He isn't used to so much exercise. Let that boy ride in his chair again until he has a chance to build up his strength. But praise the Lord! We know that the miracle is done, Jesus has given this boy his legs and healed his hemophobia, too!" As the woman wheeled him down the aisle, the people reached out to touch him, said kind and happy things to him, and he cried. His mother was crying for joy. She embraced him and said, "You walked," and Billy cried harder. Out in the car he told her the truth. She looked off toward the brightly lit door of that flamboyant, that seductive tent, and she said, "God damn him to burn in hell forever." But Billy was quite, quite sure that God would do no such thing.

Not that Billy doubted God. No, God had all power, God was a granter of prayers. God was even fair-minded, after his fashion. But Billy knew now that when God set himself to balance things in the world, he did it sneaky. He did it tricky. He did it ass-backward, so that anybody who wanted to could see his works in the world and still doubt God. After all, what good was faith if God went around leaving plain evidence of his goodness in the world? No, not God. His goodness would be kept a profound secret, Billy knew that. Just a secret God kept to himself.

And sure enough, when God set out to even things up for Billy, he didn't do the obvious thing. He didn't let the nerves heal, he didn't send the miracle of feeling, the blessing of pain into Billy's empty legs. Instead God, who probably had a bet on with Satan about this one, gave Billy another gift entirely, an unlooked-for blessing that would break his heart.

Mother was wheeling Billy around the park. It was a fine summer day, which means that the humidity was so high that fish could live for days out of the water. Billy was dripping sweat, and he knew that when he got home he'd have a hell of a diaper rash, and Mother would say, "Oh you poor dear," and Billy would grieve because it didn't even itch. The river was flowing low and there were big rocks uncovered by the shore. Billy sat there watching the kids climb around on the rocks. His mother saw what he was watching and tried to take him away so he wouldn't get depressed about how he couldn't climb, but Billy wouldn't let her. He just stayed aand watched. He picked out one kid in particular, a pretty-faced body with a muscled chest, about two years older than Billy. Her watched everything that boy did, and pretended that he was donig it. That was a good thing to do, Billy would rather do that than anything, watch this boy play for him on the rocks.

But all the time there was this idiot girl watching *Billy*. She was on the grass, far back from the shore, where all the cripples have to stay. She walked like an inchworm almost, each step a major event, as if she was a big doll with a little driver inside working the controls, and the driver wasn't very good at it yet. Billy tried to watch the golden body of the pretty-faced boy, but this spastic girl kept lurching around at the edges of his eyes.

"Make that retard go away," Billy whispered.

"What?" asked Mother.

"I don't want to look at that retard girl."

"Then don't look at her."

"Make her go away. She keeps looking at *me*."

Mother patted Billy's shoulder. "Other people got rights, Billy. I can't make her go away from the park. You want me to take you somewhere else?"

"No." Not while the golden boy was standing tall on the rocks, extending himself to snatch frisbies out of the air without falling. Like God catching lightning and laughing in delight.

The spastic girl came closer and closer, in her sidewise way. And Billy grew more and more determined not to pay the slightest heed to her. It was obvious, though, that she was coming to him, that she meant to *reach* him, and as he sat there he grew afraid. What would she do? His greatest fear was of someone snatching his urine bag from between his legs and holding it up, the catheter tugging away at him, and everybody laughing and laughing. That was what he hated worst, living his life like a tire with a slow leak. He knew that she would grab between his legs for the urine bag under his lap robe, and probably spill it all over, she was such a spastic. But he said nothing of his fear, just waited, holding onto his lap robe, watching the golden boy jump from the highest rock into river in order to splash the kids who were perched on the lesser rocks.

Then the spastic girl touched him. Thumped her club of a hand into his arm and moaned loudly. Billy cried out, "Oh, God!" The girl shuddered and fell to the ground, weeping.

All at once every single person in the park ran over and leaned around, jostling and looking. Billy held tight to his lap robe, lest someone pull it away. The spastic girl's parents were all apology, she'd never done anything like that, she usually just kept to herself, we're so sorry, so *terribly* sorry. They lifted the girl to her feet, tried to lead her away, but she shrugged them off violently. She shuddered again, and formed her mouth elaborately to make a word. Her parents watched her lips intently, but when the words came, they were clear. "I am better," she said.

Carefully she took a step, not toward her parents, but toward Billy. The step was not a lurch controlled by a clumsy little puppeteer. It was slow and uncertain, but it was a human step. "He healed me," she said.

Step after step, each more deft than the last, and Billy forgot all about his lap robe. She was healed, she was whole. She had touched him and now she was cured.

"Praise God," someone in the crowd said.

"It's just like on TV," someone else said.

"Saw it with my own two eyes."

And the girl fell to her knees beside Billy and kissed his hand and wept and wept.

They started coming after that, as word spread. Just a shy-looking man at the front door, a pesky fat lady with a skinny brother, a mother with two mongoloid children. All the freaks in Billy's town, all the sufferers, all the desperate seemed to find the way to his house. "No," Billy told Mother again and again. "I don't want to see nobody."

"But it's a little baby," Mother said. "She's so sweet. He's been through so much pain."

They came in, one by one, and demanded or begged or prayed or just timidly whispered to him, "Heal me." Then Billy would sit there, trembling, as they reached out and touched him. When they knew that they were healed, and they always were, they cried and kissed and praised and thanked and offered money. Billy always refused the money and said precious little else. "Aren't you going to give the glory to God?" asked one lady, whose son Billy healed of leukemia. But Billy just looked at his lap robe until she went away.

The first reporters came from the grocery store papers, the ones that always know about the UFOs. They kept asking him to prophesy the future, until Billy told Mother not to let them come in anymore. Mother tried to keep them out, but they even pretended to be cripples in order to get past the door. They wrote stories about the "crippled healer" and kept quoting Billy as saying things that he never said. They also published his address.

Hundreds of people came every day now, a constant stream all day. One lady with a gimp leg said, "Praise the Lord, it was worth the hundred dollars."

"What hundred dollars?" asked Billy.

"The hundred dollars I give your mother. I give the doctors a thousand bucks and the government give them ten thousand more and they never done a damn thing for me."

Billy called Mother. She came in. "This woman says she gave you a hundred dollars."

"I didn't ask for the money," Mother said.

"Give it back," Billy said.

Mother took the money out of her apron and gave it back. The woman clucked about how she didn't mind either way and left.

"I ain't no Bucky Fay," Billy said.

"Of course you ain't," Mother said. "When people touch you, they get better."

"No money, from nobody."

"That's real smart," Mother said. "I lost my job last week, Billy. I'm home all day just keeping them away from you. How are we going to live?"

Billy just sat there, trying to think about it. "Don't let them in anymore," he said. "Lock the doors and go to work."

Mother started to cry. "Billy, I can't stand it if you don't let them in. All those babies; all those twisted-up people, all those cancers and the fear of death in their faces, I can't stand it except that somehow, by some miracle, when they come in your room and touch you, they come out whole. I don't know how to turn them away. Jesus gave you a gift I didn't think existed in the world, but it didn't belong to you, Billy. It belongs to *them*."

"I touch myself every day," Billy whispered, "and I never get better."

From then on Mother only took half of whatever people offered, and only *after* they were healed, so people wouldn't get the idea that the healing depended on the money. That way she was able to scrape up enough to keep the roof over their heads and food on the table. "There's a lot less thankful money than bribe money in the world," she said to Billy. Billy just ate, being careful not to spill hot soup on his lap, because he'd never know if he scalded himself.

Then one day the TV cameras came, and the movie cameras, and set up on the lawn and in the street outside.

"What the hell are you doing?" demanded Billy's Mother.

"Bucky Fay's coming to meet the crippled Healer," said the movie man. "We want to have this for Bucky Fay's show."

"If you try to bring one little camera inside our house I'll have the police on you."

"The public's got a right to know," said the man, pointing the camera at her.

"The public's got a right to kiss my ass," said Mother, and she went back into the house and told everybody to go away and come back tomorrow, they were locking up the house for the day.

Mother and Billy watched through the lacy curtains while Bucky Fay got out of his limousine and waved at the cameras and the people crowded around in the street.

"Don't let him in, Mother," said Billy.

Bucky Fay knocked on the door.

"Don't answer," said Billy.

Bucky Fay knocked and knocked. Then he gestured to the cameramen and they all went back to their vans and all of Bucky Fay's helpers went back to their cars and the police held the crowd far away, and Bucky Fay started talking.

"Billy," said Bucky Fay, "I don't aim to hurt you. You're a true healer, I just want to shake your hand."

"Don't let him touch me again," said Billy. Mother shook her head.

"If you let me help you, you can heal hundreds and hundreds more people, all around the world, and bring millions of TV viewers to Jesus."

"The boy don't want you," Mother said.

"Why are you afraid of me? I didn't give you your gift, God did."

"Go away!" Billy shouted.

There was silence for a moment outside the door. Then Bucky Fay's voice came again, softer, and it sounded like he was holding back a sob. "Billy, why do you think I come to you? I am the worst son-of-a-bitch I know, and I come for you to heal me."

That was not a thing that Billy had ever thought to hear from Bucky Fay.

Bucky Fay was talking soft now, so it was sometimes hard to understand him. "In the name of Jesus, boy, do you think I woke up one morning and said to myself, 'Bucky Fay, go out and be a healer and you'll get rich'? Think I said that? No sir. I had a gift once. Like yours, I had a gift. I found it one day when I was swimming at the water hole with my big brother Jeddy. Jeddy, he was a show-off, he was always tempting Death to come for him, and that day he dove right down from the highest branch and plunked his head smack in the softest, stickiest mud on the bottom of Pachuckamunkey River. Took fifteen minutes just to get his head loose. They brought him to shore and he was dead, his face all covered with mud. And I screamed and cried out loud, 'God, you ain't got no right!' and then I touched my brother, and smacked him on the head, I said, 'God damn you, Jeddy, you pin-headed jackass, you ain't dead, get up and walk!' And that was when I discovered I had the gift. Because Jeddy reached up and wiped the mud off his eyes and rolled over and puked the black Pachukey

water all over grass there. 'Thank you Jesus,' I said. In those days I could lay hands on mules with bent legs and they'd go straight. A baby with measles, and his spots would go. I had a good heart then. I healed colored people, and in those days even the doctors wouldn't go so far as *that*. But then they offered me money, and I took it, and they asked me to preach even though I didn't know a damn thing, and so I preached, and pretty soon I found myself in a jet airplane that I owned flying over a airstrip that I owned heading for a TV station that I owned and I said to myself, Bucky Fay, *you* haven't healed a soul in twenty years. A few folks have gotten better because of their own faith, but *you* lost the gift. You threw it away for the sake of money." On the other side of the door Bucky Fay wailed in anguish. "Oh, God in heaven, let me in this door or I will die!"

Billy nodded, tears in his eyes, and Mother opened the door. Bucky Fay was on his knees leaning against the door so he nearly fell into the room. He didn't even stand up to walk over to Billy, just crawled most of the way and then said, "Billy, the light of God is in your eyes. Heal me of my affliction! My disease is love of money! My disease is forgetting the Lord God of heaven! Heal me and let me have my gift back again, and I will never stray, not ever so long as I live!"

Billy reached out his hand. Slow and trembling, Bucky Fay gently took that hand and kissed it, and touched it to the tears hot and wet on his cheeks. "You have given me," he said, "you have given me this day a gift that I never thought to have again. I am whole!" He got up, kissed Billy on both cheeks, then stepped back. "Oh, my child, I will pray for you. With all my heart I will pray that God will remove your paralysis from your legs. For I believe he gave you your paralysis to teach you compassion for the cripple, just as he gave me temptation to teach me compassion for the sinner. God bless you, Billy, Hallelujah!"

"Hallelujah," said Billy softly. He was crying too—couldn't help it, he felt so good. He had longed for vengeance, and instead he had forgiven, and he felt *holy*.

That is, until he realized that the TV cameras had come in right behind Bucky Fay, and were taking a close-up of Billy's tear-stained face, of Mother wringing her hands and weeping. Bucky Fay walked out the door, his clenched fist high above his head, and the crowd outside greeted him with a cheer. "Hallelujah!" shouted Bucky. "Jesus had made me whole!"

It played real well on the religious station. Bucky Fay's repentance—oh, how the crowds in the studio audience gasped at his confession. How the people wept at the moment when Billy reached out his hand. It was a fine show. And at the end, Bucky Fay wept again. "Oh, my friends who have trusted me, you have seen the mighty change in my heart. From now on I will wear the one suit that you see me wearing now. I have forsaken my diamond cuff links and my Lear jet and my golf course in Louisiana. I am so ashamed of what I was before God healed me with the hands of that little crippled boy. I tell all of you—send me no more money! Don't send me a single dime to post office box eight three nine, Christian City, Louisiana 70539. I am not fit to have your money. Contribute your tithes and offerings to worthier men than I. Send me *nothing!*—"

Then he knelt and bowed his head for a moment, and then looked up again, out into the audience, into the cameras, tears flowing down his face. "Unless. Unless you forgive me. Unless you believe that Jesus has changed me before your very eyes."

Mother switched off the TV savagely.

"After seeing all those other people get better," Billy whispered. "I thought he might've gotten better, too."

Mother shook her head and looked away. "What he got isn't a disease." Then she bent over the wheelchair and hugged him. "I feel so bad, Billy!"

"I don't feel bad," Billy said. "Jesus cured the blind people and the deaf people and the crippled people and the lepers. But as far as I remember, the Bible don't say he ever cured even one son-of-a-bitch."

She was still hugging him, which he didn't mind even though he near smothered in her bosom. Now she chuckled. It was all right, if Mother chuckled about it. "Guess you're right about that," Mother said. "Even Jesus did no better."

For a while they had a rest, because the people who believed went to Bucky Fay and the doubters figured that Billy was no better. The newspaper and TV people stopped coming around, too, because Billy never put on a show for them and never said anything that people would pay money to read. Then, after a while, the sick people started coming back, just a few a week at first, and then more and more. They were uncertain, skeptical. They hadn't heard of Billy on TV lately, hadn't read about him either, and he lived in such a poor neighborhood, with no signs or anything.

More than once a car with out-of-state plates drove back and forth in front of the house before it stopped and someone came in. The ones who came were those who had lost all other hope, who were willing to try anything, even something as unlikely as this. They had heard a rumor, someone had a cousin whose best friend was healed. They always felt like such damn fools visiting this crippled kid, but it was better than sitting home waiting for death.

So they came, more and more of them. Mother had to quit her job again. All day Billy waited in his bedroom for them to come in. They always looked so distant, guarding themselves against another disillusionment. Billy, too, was afraid, waiting for the day when someone would place a baby in his arms and the child would die, the healing power gone out of him. But it didn't happen, day after day it didn't happen, and the people kept coming fearful and departing in joy.

Mother and Billy lived pretty poorly, since they only took money that came from gratitude instead of money meant to buy. But Billy had a decent life, if you don't mind being paralyzed and stuck home all the time, and Mother didn't mind too much either, since there was always the sight of the blind seeing and the crippled walking and those withered-up children coming out whole and strong.

Then one day after quite a few years there came a young woman who wasn't sick. She was healthy and tall and nice-looking, in a kitcheny kind of way. She had rolled-up sleeves and hands that looked like they'd met dishwater before, and she walked right into the house and said, "Make room, I'm moving in."

"Now, girl," said Mother, "we got a small house and no room to put you up. I think you got the wrong idea of what kind of Christian charity we offer here."

"Yes, Ma'am. I know just what you do. Because I am the little girl who touched Billy that day by the riverside and started all your misery."

"Now, girl, you know that didn't start our misery."

"I've never forgotten. I grew up and went through two husbands and had no children and no memory of real love except for what I saw in the face of a crippled boy at the riverside, and I thought, 'He needs me, and I need him.' So here I am, I'm here to help, tell me what to do and step aside."

Her name was Madeleine and she stayed from then on. She wasn't noisy and she wasn't bossy, she just worked her share and

got along. It was hard to know for sure why it was so, but with Madeleine there, even with no money and no legs, Billy's life was good. They sang a lot of songs, Mother and Billy and Madeleine, sang and played games and talked about a lot of things, when the visitors gave them time. And only once in all those years did Madeleine ever talk to Billy about religion. And then it was just a question.

"Billy," asked Madeleine, "are you God?"

Billy shook his head. "God ain't no cripple."

RISING GENERATION

by RAMSEY CAMPBELL

It was like something from an old Zombie movie — even the kids had caught the spirit of it. Heather Fry didn't find it amusing.

As they approached the cave beneath the castle some of the children began to play at zombies, hobbling stiffly, arms outstretched. Heather Fry frowned. If they knew the stories about the place, despite her efforts to make sure they didn't, she hoped they wouldn't frighten the others. She hadn't wanted to come at all; it had been Miss Sharp's idea, and she'd been teaching decades longer than Heather, so of course she had her way. The children were still plodding inexorably toward their victims. Then Joanne said "You're only being like those men in that film last night." Heather smiled with relief. "Keep together and wait for me," she called.

She glanced up at the castle, set atop the hill like a crown, snapped and bent and discolored by time. Overhead sailed a pale blue sky, only a wake of thin foamy clouds on the horizon betraying any movement. Against the sky, just below the castle, Heather saw three figures toiling upward. Odd, she thought, the school had been told the castle was forbidden to visitors because of the danger of falling stone, which was why they'd had to make do with the cave. Still, she was glad she hadn't had to coax her class all the way up there. The three were moving slowly and clumsily, no doubt exhausted by their climb, and even from where Heather stood their faces looked exceptionally pale.

She had to knock several times on the door of the guide's hut before he emerged. Looking in beyond him, Heather wondered what had taken his time. Not tidying the hut, certainly, because the desk looked blitzed, scattered and overflowing with forms and

even an upset ink-bottle, fortunately stoppered. She looked at the guide and her opinion sank further. Clearly he didn't believe in shaving or cutting his nails, and he was pale enough to have been born in a cave, she thought. He didn't even bother to turn to her; he stared at the children lined up at the cave entrance, though by his lack of expression he might as well have been blind. "I'd rather you didn't say anything about the legend," she said.

His stare swivelled to her and held for so long she felt it making a fool of her. "You know what I mean," she said, determined to show him she did too. "The stories about the castle. About how the baron was supposed to keep zombies in the cave to work for him, until someone killed him and walled them up. I know it's only a story, but not for the children, please."

When he'd finished staring at her he walked toward the cave, his hands dangling on his long arms and almost brushing his knees. At least he won't interrupt, she thought. I wonder how much he's paid, and for what? There was even a propped-up boot poking out from beneath the desk.

As she reached the near end of the line of children he was trudging into the cave. Daylight slipped from his back and he merged with the enormous darkness, then the walls closed about him as his torch awakened them. Heather switched on her own torch. "Stay with your partner," she called, paragraphing with her fingers. "Stay in the light. And don't lag."

The children, fourteen pairs of them, were hurrying after the guide's light. The cave was wide at the entrance but swiftly narrowed as it curved, and when Heather glanced back a minute later, lips of darkness had closed behind them. As the guide's torch wavered the corrugations of the walls rippled like the soft gulping flesh of a throat. The children were glancing about uneasily like young wild animals, worried by the dark sly shifting they glimpsed at the edge of their vision. Heather steadied her beam about them, and the thousands of tons of stone above their heads closed down.

Not that it was easy to steady the beam. In the cave he'd picked up speed considerably, and she and the children had to hurry so as not to be left behind. Maybe he feels at home, she thought angrily. "Will you slow down, please," she called, and heard Debbie at the front of the line say, "Miss Fry says you've got to slow down."

The guide's light caught a wide flat slab of roof that looked as if it were sagging. Scattered earth crunched softly beneath Heather's

feet. About now, she was sure, they would be heading up and out the other side of the hill. Joanne, who hadn't let Debbie convince her as a zombie, and Debbie squeezed back to Heather along the contracting passage. "I don't like that man," Joanne said. "He's dirty."

"What do you mean?" Heather said, sounding too worried.

But Joanne said "He's got earth in his ears."

"Will you hold our hands if we're frightened?" Debbie said.

"Now I can't hold everyone's hand, can I?" Earth slid from beneath Heather's feet. Odd, she thought: must come from the guide's ears and beneath his nails, and began to giggle, shaking her head when they asked why. He was still forcing them to hurry, but she was beginning to be glad that at least they wouldn't have to depend on him much longer. "If you think of questions don't ask them yet," she called. "Wait until we're outside."

"I wish we didn't have to come underground," Joanne said.

Then you should have said before, Heather thought. "You'll be able to look for things in the field later," she said. And at least you haven't had Miss Sharp herding you as well as her own class. If they hadn't come on ahead they would have had to suffer her running their picnic.

"But why do we have to come down when it's nice? Sharon didn't have to."

"It'll be nice this afternoon. Sharon can't go into places that are closed in, just as you don't like high places. So you see, you're lucky today."

"I don't feel lucky," Joanne said.

The ridges of the walls were still swaying gently, like the leaves of a submarine plant, and now one reached out and tugged at Heather's sleeve. She flinched away then saw that it was a splintered plank, several of which were propped against the wall, looking as if they'd once been fastened together. Ahead the cave forked, and the children were following the shrinking rim of light into the left-hand passage, which was so low that they had to stoop. "Go on, you're all right," she told Debbie, who was hesitating. Stupid man, she raged.

It was tighter than she'd thought. She had to hold one arm straight out in front of her so that the light urged the children on, leaving herself surrounded by darkness that coldly pressed her shoulders down when she tried to see ahead. If this passage had been fenced off, as she suspected, she was sorry it had been reopened. The children's ridged shadows rippled like caterpillars.



Suddenly Debbie halted. "There's someone else in here," she said. "Well?" Joanne said. "It's not your cave."

Now all the children had gone quiet, and Heather could hear it too: the footsteps of several people tramping forward from deeper within the cave. Each step was followed by a scattering sound like brief dry rain. "Men working in the caves," she called, waiting for someone to ask what the dry sound was so that she could say they were carrying earth. Don't ask why, she thought. Something to do with the castle, perhaps with the men she'd seen on the hill. But the footsteps had stopped.

When she straightened up at last the darkness clenched on her head; she had to steady herself against the wall. Her vertigo gradually steadied, and she peered ahead. The children had caught up with the guide, who was silhouetted against a gaping tunnel of bright pale stone. As she started toward him he pulled something from his pocket and hurled it beyond her.

Debbie made to retrieve it. "It's all right," Heather said, and ushered the pair of them with her light toward the other children. Then, cursing his rudeness, she turned the beam on what she assumed he'd thrown her to catch. She peered closer, but it was exactly what it seemed: a packed lump of earth. Right, she thought, if I can lose you your job, you're out of work now.

She advanced on him. He was standing in the mouth of a side tunnel, staring back at her and pointing his torch deeper into the main passage. The children were hurrying past him into the hard tube of light. She was nearly upon him when he plodded out of the side tunnel, and she saw that the children were heading for a jagged opening at the limit of the beam, surrounded by exploded stone sprinkled with earth. She'd opened her mouth to call them back when his hand gripped her face and crushed her lips, forcing her back into the side tunnel.

His cold hand smelled thickly of earth. His arm was so long that her nails flailed inches short of his face. "Where's Miss Fry?" Debbie called, and he pointed ahead with his torch. Then he pushed Heather further into the cave, though she hacked at his shins. All at once she remembered that the boot beneath the desk had been propped on its toe: there might have been a leg beyond it.

Then the children screamed; one chorus of panic, then silence. Heather's teeth closed in the flesh of his hand, but he continued to shove her back into the cave. She saw her torch gazing up at the roof of the main passage, retreating. His own torch drooped in his

hand, and its light drew the walls to leap and struggle, imitating her.

Now he was forcing her toward the cave floor. She caught sight of a mound of earth into which he began to press her head, as if for baptism. She fought upward, teeth grinding in his flesh, and saw figures groping past her upturned torch. They were the children.

She let herself go limp at once, and managed to twist out of the way as he fell. But he kept hold of her until she succeeded in bringing her foot forward and grinding his face beneath her heel like a great pale insect. He still made no vocal sound. Then she fled staggering to her torch, grabbed it, and ran. The stone wrinkles of the low roof seemed more hindering, as if now she were battling a current. Before she was free of the roof she heard him crawling in the darkness at her heels, like a worm.

When the children appeared at the end of her swaying tunnel of light she gave a wordless cry of relief. She could feel nothing but relief that they were covered with dirt: they'd been playing. They still were, just short of the border of daylight, and they'd even persuaded Joanne to be a zombie. "Quickly," Heather gasped. "Run to Miss Sharp's class." But they continued playing, turning stiffly toward her, arms groping. Then, as she saw the earth trickling from their mouths and noses, she knew they weren't playing at all.

Wonderland

by RICHARD CHRISTIAN MATHESON
and WILLIAM RELLING JR.

He knew himself pretty well;
he was too genteel to be a murderer.
Or at least he thought he was.

Julian Cross looked at the woman and thought to himself: *I wonder what it would be like to cut her throat?*

He lay there, shrouded in grey light, staring at her, watching the sheet covering her rise and fall in a steady rhythm. What would it be like? he wondered. To feel the blade pressed against her flesh, slicing through? To cut off her cry and see the blood staining the sheets muddy purple . . .

Suddenly, he felt sick.

He turned from her and stared up at the ceiling, hating himself. *My God*, Cross thought. *I'm fucking losing it.*

He sat up on the bed, pressing his face into his hands, shaking. The image he'd conjured in his mind had horrified him.

He glanced over at the woman once more, then gently eased himself off the bed, padded silently across the floor of the bedroom, moving to the view window. Cross tilted up the shutters that opened like a score of waking eyes, and chilly air caressed his naked skin.

He stared out at the night, growing afraid of himself.

Below lay Los Angeles, twinkling and speedballing; weaving out of control. The massive city was smothering under a blanket of fog, its matrices of light nearly swallowed.

Cross reached for a bottle of scotch that lay on a table beneath the window. He poured the liquor over ice into a glass and stared out at the blackness, sipping the drink quietly. The crawling fog reminded him of where he'd come from, and he felt

homesickness flickering through him like the faint remembrance of a friend's funeral.

This was his first trip to the States. He'd flown across the ocean apprehensively, but was pleased that the first major showing in American of his sculptures at the Museum of Contemporary Art in downtown Los Angeles was an unqualified success. Renowned sculptor Julian Cross, the Boy Wonder of the European Art Scene, acclaimed for sensitive work, honest sentimentality and humanism; a reviewer in the *Los Angeles Times* had accused Cross of "possessing an almost feminine sensibility in the best sense, his sculptures a refreshingly non-violent emotional resonance."

Whatever the fuck that means, Cross thought, biting into an ice cube. Its frozen splinters made his teeth ache. Bloody Yanks probably thought he was a fag—they thought *all* Englishmen were fags. He looked over his shoulder at the woman lying on the bed and smiled.

They were wrong.

Five nights in LA, a different lady each night. Though except for this one tonight, each of them had come on to *him*, at parties or at the show. All of them groupies, the same as the ladies back home; quick studies, parroting speeches flattering his work they'd heard somewhere else. If one more gaudy blonde had approached him to say his art had touched her—as if he were in tune with her feelings, as if he'd read her very soul—he would've screamed.

Which was why he'd cancelled a restaurant engagement with the female owner of a small gallery called Anti-Bodies, on some place called Melrose Avenue; gotten into his rented Jensen and done a Grand Prix into Hollywood by himself. He spent the better part of an hour trolling Hollywood Boulevard, its sensual decay gradually sickening him. The street was nothing like he'd imagined it from films and television; it shimmered with dark energy, all glamour bled to death, yet shamelessly propped-up as if still seductive. As if still alive. But its percussive void was just what Cross was in the mood for tonight. An intimate superficiality.

The touch of a stranger.

He looked at the woman in the bed and sipped more scotch.

He'd found her on Sunset Boulevard, where she'd stood alone on a corner, watching passing cars with casual fascination. He'd rolled by her one time, then circled the block again, struck by her elegant good looks: tall, slender and long-legged, with red hair that hung loosely.

Her ice-blue eyes had watched and stared.

He'd pulled Jensen to the curb and asked her what her time was worth. She'd looked into his eyes in a way that excited him as she took a step closer. They'd driven west on Sunset, as fog began to claw its way inland from the ocean, and Cross turned the Jensen right onto Laurel Canyon; heading into the mountains.

As he guided the car deeper into the canyon, they'd talked to each other quietly. She'd noticed his accent and asked where he was from, whether he was living in LA or just visiting. He told her he was in town for only a few days; the Museum had sub-leased a house in the canyon for him.

Then he mentioned he'd been surprised she was the only . . . lady he'd seen on the street that evening, and she told him it was because of the murders.

"What murders?" he'd asked politely.

She told him several people had been slashed to death by a killer still at large, and the police had been cracking down on prostitution to protect potential victims. Cross had raised an interested brow and driven farther into Laurel Canyon, turning left into Lookout Mountain Avenue, a road that immediately narrowed as it rose steeply up the side of the canyon. He steered the car carefully, climbing higher, until the headlights glanced off a street sign that read:

WONDERLAND AVENUE

"Your house is on Wonderland?" she'd asked him, an odd curiosity in her voice. "Your name isn't Alice, is it?"

He'd smiled and said, "No," in a tone that almost made her insist he let her out. But she didn't, and by then they'd come to the house, perched atop a cliff overlooking the city.

Cross sipped at his scotch, wondering how long ago that had been. Three hours? Four? He gazed out at the city below, drowned in a pewter fog . . . and once again found himself thinking of her throat . . . its pale curve unprotected.

As he drank from his nearly empty glass, he suddenly saw himself moving through mist, the glass turned into a blade gripped tightly in his hand. He watched himself approaching her in darkness, kneeling beside her, laying the blade against her flesh. Watched himself as he dragged its perfect sharpness from left to right and drenched her pillow red.

He shook his head, trying to clear away the thought, poured more liquor into his glass and gulped it down. What the Christ was the matter with him? Maybe it was time to get out of LA if the bloody fog was going to have him thinking like Jack the Ripper, slicing up a tart just for having shown him a good time . . .

He heard her whispering from the bed: "Honey?"

"I thought you were asleep," he said, turning to face her.

She stared at him with a strangely intimate expression, and pulled the top sheet covering herself higher. "I have to leave," she said.

He struggled to control his emotions as he set down his empty glass and moved toward her. "I feel sorta bad taking off," she was saying. "You're really a nice guy."

Cross sat down on the edge of the bed, feeling frightened of what he would do next. He forced himself to look at her. His blood was racing.

"Listen," he whispered. "Something . . . strange has been going through my mind." He shook his head heavily, then forced a slight smile. "I'm pretty drunk, and maybe I shouldn't tell you this . . ."

She was still looking at him strangely. He could feel his mouth twitching, losing control.

"It's about what you told me before," he said. "About those . . . women being . . ." He could feel perspiration dampening his forehead as he tried to say *cut up*. But the words fell apart.

He was remembering the sculpture he'd worked on that afternoon; the knife he'd used, its polished edge slicing effortlessly through shapless clay.

"Anyway," he said, "while you were lying in bed just now . . ."

He could see her throat split wide, the blood running down, forming a hideous red necklace.

She watched him, her expression cinching tight. She lit a cigarette and burned a finger with the match, waved out the flame nervously. Watching every move now; trying not to upset his mood.

"Maybe I'm not quite what you think I am," he said, wanting to add that he wasn't a violent man. But he was unable to stop staring at her throat.

For a moment their eyes locked.

Just do it, he told himself.

"Is there something you want to tell me?" she asked, turning away from him to glance toward the telephone that rested on the

nightstand beside the bed. Wondering how far he was from it, how long it would take him to react if she reached for it and —

"Yeah, there's . . . something." Cross laughed uneasily, staring toward the window. "For the last half hour or so, all I've been thinking about is how it would feel to slash your throat."

He closed his eyes, ashamed of the confession. His head sank to his chest and he was only dimly aware of her voice through the drunken cloth of his brain.

"Naughty boy," she said, suddenly standing over him to grab him by the hair, as she took the scalpel she'd hidden and sank the blade into his neck. "I didn't say you could read my mind."



Ask Not

by RUDY MATIC

The time traveler watched as Lee Harvey Oswald focussed the telescopic site of the 6.5mm Mannlicher-Carcano rifle — model 91/38, a mail order purchase from Klein's.

"Gotcha," said Lee Harvey Oswald.
"Think so?" said the time traveler.

"Yeah. One card."

The time traveler dealt one card. "I'll have two, myself," he said.

"Well?" said Oswald.

"Jack."

"Queen." Oswald grinned. "I told you, gramps. Didn't I tell you?"

"You did, Lee. Yes sir. You certainly have got luck."

"Luck, shit," said Oswald. "No such thing as 'luck,' old man."

The time traveler tugged at his white hair and looked at the fatal Queen. "Well, that about does it for me," he said. His age-spotted hands gathered up the cards and began twisting a bright yellow rubber band around the deck. "Going to watch the motorcade, Lee?" he said.

Oswald looked out the sixth-floor window of the Texas School Book Depository.

"Nah. What for? To watch another lousy big shot strut?" Oswald rubbed his wrist against his chest. "They think they run this country. They don't know nothing. They don't know history, how it operates."

"Dialectics."

"Dialectical Materialism. Yeah." His eyes scanned the streets. "History's got a direction. History's got laws. Man can't fight those laws."

"And God's not there to," said the time traveler. "Sort of a sad philosophy."

"Kennedy, he's nothing. One man is nothing."

"Oh, I don't know, Lee," said the time traveler. "I think one man can do a lot if he tries. I think he ought to try, too." He got up, wincing a bit from pains in his lower back. He massaged the spot with his fist and released a breath. "Well, Lee, thanks for the game, I guess. See you tomorrow."

Oswald bit the nail of his middle finger. "Yeah."

The time traveler walked down to the elevators. He didn't feel well. Old age, he realized. Not that the radiation poisoning helped any; nor the battery of compensating drugs.

But the drugs would hold him together. That was all that counted.

He pressed the down button. The doors parted. The time traveler entered and took it down two floors. He got out, went to the emergency stairwell, and walked—silently, cautiously—back up.

He took a deep breath at the top of the stairs. Several deep breaths. The drugs were losing their battle with his cancers; that was inevitable. But he had to get control of himself. Oswald was outside. Preparing.

Oswald. It had been easy to strike up a friendship of sorts, reflected the time traveler. Oswald wasn't much liked. His touchiness, his mono-dimensionality, his Marxist pronouncements, his paranoia; he was classed as a nut, and avoided. But Oswald needed to talk, to justify himself. The personality assessments of the psychohistorians showed that. And the time traveler had, so to speak, time; and a personal perverse interest. He listened. And waited.

But no longer. He looked at the face of his watch. Eleven hundred thirty-one hours.

The time traveler slid from the sixth-floor exit. He walked to where he had a clean view of the spot the Warren Commission had determined Oswald made the final preparations. Oswald was there, his back to the time traveler. *It* was there too: the time traveler's eyes moved down the stock, the barrel, the telescopic sight of the six-point-five-millimeter Mannlicher-Carcano rifle. Model 91/38. Year of manufacture, 1940. Serial number C2766. Mail order purchase from Klein's.

Far away, the sounds of the crowds in Dealey Plaza rustled like surf.

The time traveler knelt behind the askew stacked crates of

his vantage point. He opened his lunchbox. He removed a pair of transparent plastic gloves and put them on. He next removed from the folds of a small blue bath towel wrapped in wax paper a silenced Navy-modified nine-millimeter parabellum Browning automatic with fourteen-round capacity. The time traveler checked it one last time, then clicked off the safety.

The cheers grew, the rising of the surf: Oswald stood. Oswald, kneading sweat from his upper lip with the back of his hand, the Mannlicher-Carcano poised in the other, stood at the window. Oswald, taking the Mannlicher-Carcano in both hands now; kneeling; looking down the sights and wetting his lip with a lithe pink tongue. Cries, cheers; intolerable cheers. Oswald jutted the stock to his shoulder and lined the sights perfectly now and wrapped his finger onto the trigger and took one breath and held it.

"No," said the time traveler; gun muzzle at the back of Oswald's skull. "No, Lee."

Oswald's head screwed back: a gun? The old man? With a gun?

"Put it down, Lee. Very slowly. That's right. Now get away from the window."

The time traveler motioned Oswald away from the window with the point of his Browning. The time traveler stood before the window. Over the rifle. Oswald would never touch it again.

His blue eyes examined Lee's a final time.

"Get out," he said.

"—What?"

"Get out. You're free. Go."

The voices of the crowd reeled, shrieked. Oswald took a half-step back. A whole step.

"Go!"

Oswald ran.

The time traveler watched Oswald's back disappear into the stairwell. He released his pistol. It fell by his feet. He looked down at the Mannlicher-Carcano, reached down, took it, rose, turned, aimed, and shot off the head of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, thirty-fifth President of the United States.

The time traveler sat in the bar, face in his hands, getting drunker. A juke box in the corner played "I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire," by the Ink Spots. A seated sunglassed negro

with creamy-colored shoes cooed along.

The time traveler pulled a shaking, ashen hand from his cheek. There was still a trace of blood on his palm. The cheek was bruised in two spots, and the unshaven jaw swollen and discolored. They hadn't been gentle at the last bar. They hadn't been gentle at the bar before that.

He lowered his hand, knocking over the shot glass. Remnants of gin streamed across the wood's pockmarks of cigarette burns and coaster scratches. The bartender, a wrestler-shouldered, Asian-eyed black gone to fat, looked on with restrained disgust. He rubbed a slab of palm on his green and orange checkered vest. He did not particularly care to have white drunks come in slumming at his place. The only whites who did that in Dallas wore blue uniforms and badges and left with a fifty each from his cash register after helping themselves to free beers.

He took a slow deep breath. He got a rag. This wasn't a day to throw people in the street. Any people. A stroke cleared away the tracks of the gin.

The time traveler carefully straightened his glass. He stared at the glass; at his thoughts. They were wrong, thought the time traveler. The MIT groups, the theoreticians from Princeton; Onnenheim, Skoreszy, Hawking. Their consensus studies stated—would state—that with the assassination changed, the past altered, their future could not logically follow. It would cease to exist, and they would cease to exist with it and the time traveler with them. They were wrong. Apparently he would live on, marooned; here, now, for the rest of his life.

Which would be short. Months, if that long; given a flesh as perforated with cancers as the flesh of every human being still alive two decades forward, "his" two decades. Did they live on too, in some temporal crevice, the sterile six thousand and four remaining members of the human race? He prayed not.

The time traveler looked at his hands. A negro in back yelled for everyone to shut up. The bar quieted. Grainy black-and-white images from the Sylvania TV shelved above the liquor bottles played over the eyes of the faces in the negro bar; images of a funeral cortege; a slain young President making his way to Arlington. The blacks watched from their tables and their stools; most with closed expressions, a few in tears.

Tears. The time traveler looked at the tears.

He remembered November twenty-second. Every survivor

remembered Oswald's bungled gunfire. Jacqueline Kennedy's bullet-shattered torso cartwheeling into the Dallas street and a million million million photographs.

Photographs. The time traveler remembered the photographs: the collage of magazine covers, newspaper headlines, classified memos, television images. The *Life* covers: "Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy" and "Jackie Kennedy Remembered" and "Grief of a President" and "Conspiracy?" with its splash of a braying Oswald over the caption, "I Am a Marxist!" NBC's Chet Huntley and David Brinkley detailing Oswald's visit to the Soviet Embassy prior to the assassination, his Russian wife, his years in the Soviet Union. The "CBS Special Report: KGB?" Was the shooting a reprisal against the President for Soviet humiliation over the Cuban missile crisis? And finally the yearbooklike portraits of bland little-known Slavic faces on *Time* magazine, December 1963: "Radical Hard-Line Faction Takes Power in Kremlin." By killing their predecessors in a calculated power play. Krushchev, Podgorny, Andropov blown to bits in separate car-bombings.

Kennedy had not ordered the deaths. No one in the Western press or public believed that, of course. Perhaps that was part of it. Perhaps the new Soviet rulers felt that lopping the heads off the presumed killers of Jacqueline Kennedy would appease that press, that public; would shift the burden of murder and recklessness onto Kennedy. Perhaps that press and that public would then see the unavoidable need to balance Kennedy's "CIA butcheries" with a balancing counter-move. Perhaps a crisis was needed to close party ranks, to consolidate the insecure status of their coup, to flaunt the reality of their shaky command.

Perhaps they were just stupid; they ordered the taking of Berlin.

After all: what was Berlin? One city. What was one city?

The time traveler thought of the last televised press conference, the images of reporters' upturned faces, the last prepared Presidential statement: "The armed forces of the Soviet Union must remove their troops from West Berlin within a period of not more than thirty-six hours if they wish to avoid serious consequences."

They did not wish to. World War III resulted.

An aged black woman sat next to him with crossed hands over the sticks of her teak collarbones and nodded and nodded.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy. One side of the time traveler's mouth gave a sick curl. Kennedy survived, naturally. Politicians

rarely die in the wars they create. The politicians, the scientists, the salient military professionals, the top circles, the elite few—they lived. The underground bunkers had long been ready. Bunkers. Shelters. Hollowed-out mountains. Networks of communication. Structures of command.

Kennedy thrived, in a sense. Elections ended with the electorate. His emergency powers were absolute. He answered to no one, to nothing. He became more than President, he became chief-tain, totem, terminal emperor.

The time traveler ran the fingers of one shaking hand through his silvered hair. John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

He looked at his glass and saw that it was empty. "I would like to have some more gin," he whispered, after a few minutes. The bartender rolled a yellowish rag along the side of a glass with his thumb. The thumb looked smashed. The bartender watched the TV.

"Do you *hear* me? I gave you a *direct order*, mister!"

"Yeah," grunted the bartender. "You did."

A black man with a badly scarred lower lip rested his dark eyes on the time traveler. He then looked at the bartender. The man was a bouncer. The bartender had been a bouncer for seven years here himself. He'd saved some money each week in order to buy the place one day. Now it was his. He didn't want trouble in it. Not today. He had liked the President. John Kennedy had at least tried some to do right by the black man; no one else ever had. He had liked Kennedy, and now that Kennedy was dead, shot down in the streets of this lousy redneck city. He pitied him; he almost loved him. He didn't want trouble today. He shook his head at the man with the scarred lip. The man oozed his eyes back to the television screen.

"Here it is, pops. Okay?"

The bartender set down a glass before the time traveler. He set it down hard. Some of the drink shot onto the time traveler's left hand and dripped from there down to his pants leg. He watched a drop form at the end of a streak of drink at his wrist, and fall.

"Okay, pops?"

"The time traveler's head nodded, and eyes filled with dreams. Dreams of bombs. The bartender turned away.

The bombs turned out to be a blessing, thought the time traveler. They killed millions, yes, hundreds of millions. But less in the long run than the Soviets' biological warfare strains, particularly the unforeseen strontium-altered mutant strains. One of those was really

quite interesting: eventually it was going to kill everyone and everything: all existing life.

But the MIT group made a discovery: they found that six twenty-megaton thermonuclear devices exploded simultaneously within a thousand-yard radius (it happened only at Omaha; SAC headquarters, at which the Soviets had thrown everything) tore a kind of shifting, flickering hole in space-time. The Acting Government had come across it nineteen years after the first exchanges. Its potentials were grasped, its use made feasible, in five more.

Naturally, they had been afraid. What might result if time, structured history in its causes and effects, were altered, mutilated? But what were the alternatives?

The time traveler's hand contracted into a fist. He looked at it. Yes. He was the logical choice, the one to return. The scientists had resisted the idea, of course. They wanted to send someone younger, healthier, more expendable. "Expendable"; with everyone irradiated or diseased or dying or dead. Idiots. Drugs, hypnotics, would ensure all the strength and alertness necessary till the task stood done. And if it were not done, if it were bungled? The time traveler was old, but he alone had the experience, the inside knowledge, the codes, the access, ultimately the simple physical proof, to get through to Washington. To someone.

That would not be necessary now. John Fitzgerald Kennedy would issue no warnings, order no alerts, authorize no mobilizations, deploy no bombers. Not any more.

The cortege wavered and buckled on the black-and-white television screen. The bartender slapped its side with a heavy callused palm. It died, then focused. The time traveler looked into the faces on the screen. The Kennedy family walked behind the President's casket. A sudden close-up of Jacqueline, a black veil wafting like a mirage across her perfect features. Robert, walking beside her.

Robert; the time traveler had held Robert's hand when he died. He had died bald, sightless, legs removed, face vile with pus and tumors. He'd authorized the mercy killing of Robert, as he'd authorized those of Robert's son, of Rose, of Ted, of young John. He'd stood outside the operating theater when with his consent the medics began the removal of Caroline's arms and bottom face and tongue. Then, they said, the girl might at least live. But he prayed for the girl to die, and she died, and he nearly lost his mind. His responsibilities did not allow him that option.

And now?

Now she stood there alive! Robert! John, a boy of three again, watching the passing of his father's cortege, saluting a flag-draped casket as six slow white horses drew it by.

The bartender also watched; watched and twisted the bar rag in his broad oaken hands. "God damn it," he said. "God damn it."

And the time traveler began to laugh.

"Who you think did it, man?" said someone at a back table.

"They got the dude, this Oswald dude, a man—"

"Nigger, be serious, one man?"

"A team of specialists!" said the time traveler. He laughed. He couldn't stop. He began laughing louder. People looked at him.

"Shut your lip, fool."

"Yeah, man."

"—a brilliantly conceived project—"

"Shut up, man!"

"You shut up, Maurice. Maybe he do know something, man. Who, man? Who in on it? You know something? How he die, man?"

The time traveler laughed and shook and made an L with his thumb and index finger and put the index finger to his temple and made two sharp jerks and laughed and swung the hand back to the bar and struck his drink and splashed the back of the bartender's vest and pants and laughed and laughed. "The best thing that ever happened," he said. "The best!"

The bartender turned.

"You think so?" he said. "Huh? You think so?" He lashed his fist into the time traveler's head. It struck a table and the table sent a chair to the floor. He groped beside it on the floor and tried to use it to stand. He couldn't.

"It's so funny, huh. It's *so* funny!"

The bartender grabbed him by the front of the shirt and jerked him up and slapped his head once, twice, three times, four, five, six, and threw him into a door. It swung open into an alley. The people in the bar did not look in that direction. The bartender and his sister's husband Lucius and a smiling man with sunglasses and creamy-colored shoes and a man with a cut ear in his fifties named Milton went through the doorway into the alley. Together they beat John Fitzgerald Kennedy to death.

Ghosts of Night and Morning

by MARVIN KAYE

She cut off the engine,
and the world went black . . .
as if some giant hand
had suddenly smothered both car and driver
in something soft and dark.

An excerpt from novel of the same title, to be published
in August by Charter Books.

I

Olivia Aubrey believed she was too thin and tall, that her bustline was inadequate and her hips overly generous, but in truth, she had that stark angular gracefulness sometimes seen upon an Attic frieze or in the small-breasted, lithe-limbed figures painted on the curving sides of an Etruscan vase. She conceded the handsomeness of her large brown eyes, but did not know that from their lustrous depths the splendor and sorrow of her spirit welled up, refining all her features and rendering her beautiful. But if she could have chosen, she would have fashioned herself into a petite blonde like her cousin, the late Merlyn Aubrey.

The day of her appointment with Alan Hunter, editor of Porlock Press, Olivia rose early, donned faded blue slippers and faded pink bathrobe, curled up in an armchair, and wrote in her worn leather diary.

APRIL 29 Woke from a bizarre sleep, dreaming about my thirteenth birthday. Table set for a children's party, but with thirteen candles on a cake straight out of Dead Souls—cobwebs and dust, grimy cracks splitting it like a broken mirror. Mama—naked from the waist down with skin like the cake icing—cuts a piece, puts it on my plate.

"Olivia, don't wait for us, you know the dead can't eat." Us? Yes, Ben is with her, looking younger, but there's another man, too, I can't see his face. All of them staring, so I have to take a small bite of cake and it's greasy and sour and I feel sick and . . . end of dream.

Today's the day. My appointment with Alan Hunter. Will he like my poetry? Enough to publish me in the *Persons from Porlock* series? Why do I feel so flat and uninvolved? The melancholy beast lives in my heart, devouring every sprig of hope, yet what right have I to be cynical? Drab, glib drudge that I am. But every day the same nagging questions: what is there to believe? When everything is relative and arbitrary, what real difference whether I write poetry or wash Ben's dirty underwear? Only my—

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Sighing, Olivia put down her diary and went to Ben's room. Her nose caught the sharp ammonia stench as soon as she entered. Benjamin Aubrey—a large, portly man in his seventies—sat on the edge of the bed. His sparse white hair bushed over a high forehead. Blue eyes squinted myopically at the nightstand where his false teeth floated in a dusty water glass. His bare arms and legs were spindly; brown patches of psoriasis discolored his skin from ankle to knee. His dingy grey shorts were sopping with urine.

He stared at her, frowning. "Who are you?"

"Your daughter. Olivia."

"My daughter is Desdemona. You're not at all like her."

Oh, God, one of these mornings. "Don't play games, Ben, you know perfectly well who I am." But does he?

"Your name is Olivia?"

"Yes. Desdemona is your youngest daughter. I'm the eldest."

"Where is Desdemona?"

"At school."

He nodded affably. "That's right. What grade is she in?"

"She's in college, you know that."

Ben glared. "You're lying. She isn't old enough."

"She's nineteen."

The old man's jaw began to tremble. "Why are you saying these horrible things? Get my wife. She'll tell you the truth."

Olivia went cold. This was the worst part of it. Ben was usually querulous, infrequently cheerful, but no matter what mood she found him in, she always had to face this same moment.

"I said call in my wife. She'll settle this."

"You know I can't."

A long, empty silence.

"She . . . she's not dead?"

Olivia nodded. "For ten years."

Ben wept. Not a soft, familiar sort of sorrow, but raw anguish unblunted by usage. Every morning, as if for the first time, he had to learn his wife was gone.

"What's wrong with me? I used to have a good mind, didn't I?"

She took a step toward Ben to comfort him. Her nose pruned at the stink and she stopped.

Mrs. Betty Culloden was short and round, but could lift her weight in patients. She had a scraggly mustache, a toothy smile and a laugh like a barking seal. Ben liked her.

"Get goin' to your meetin'," she commanded Olivia. "I'm in charge. I still say you should put Ben in a home."

"I can take care of him."

"Like I can kiss my backside. You know what I think's wrong him, dontcha?"

But Olivia would not allow her to name it.

The damnably beautiful secretary led Olivia through a network of corridors that resembled a movie set for Kafka's *The Trial*. In an end office, she was told to wait till Alan Hunter got back. She stood there, awkward, cowed by the floor-to-ceiling bookcases of poetry chapbooks, the Persons from Porlock series. Their sudden truth shamed her. Panic. She wanted to run away *but I couldn't find my way back. I should've scattered breadcrumbs.*

She noticed a cardboard ream-sized box of white bond paper with a label pasted on its lid.

TRAGEDY IN BUCKS COUNTY
A SURVIVOR'S ACCOUNT
OF THREE NIGHTS
IN A HAUNTED HOUSE
BY CHARLES SINGLETON

What a strange coincidence, Olivia thought.

The box was sitting next to the loose manuscript itself. Olivia began to read . . .

If you have ever driven east on the Pennsylvania Turnpike from Valley Forge, you may have noticed some twenty miles above Philadelphia an exit sign for Doylestown, governmental seat of Bucks County. If you venture off the highway, you will meander through gentle countryside dotted with brightly painted farmhouses and rambling mansions, a surprising number of which are haunted. Ask any inhabitant about the monks who refused to spend a second night at Aldie Manor, or arrange a tour of nearby Fonthill, where the moving candlelight of its late housekeeper has often been seen. But there is one house you had better stay away from—a deceptively sunny white frame building with a chilling history. I went there three years ago with four friends. I was the only survivor.

In 1935, a psychic investigator brought a team to Aubrey House. They isolated a unique phenomenon on the second floor: "A cold blue light that nothing drives away or brings closer." The strangest thing about "the Aubrey Effect" is that it was observed as long ago as 1920, yet no one died in the house till 1964, when Charlotte Aubrey expired at an advanced age. But soon after she passed on, an elderly team of mediums, Phyllis and Harold Burton, held a séance at Aubrey House. A servant found the Burtons the next morning. Their minds were shattered.

Merlyn Aubrey—Charlotte's granddaughter—was my friend. She invited me and three others to the house to explore and try to figure out the true nature of the "cold blue light."

My dear, dear friend Vita Henry succumbed first. I found her body naked and maimed, her hair stark white, her eyes bulging. They ran an EEG on her, but the lines barely moved.

The second fatality was the Scottish psychic Drew Beltane, who died in his sleep, peacefully at least.

Dick Creighton bled to death on the rear stairs, not far from Merlyn's body. Her neck was broken, her eyes torn from their sockets. The police claim she ripped them out herself. I survived . . . more or less. The stroke that felled me at Aubrey House short-circuited my mind before it, too, could burn away. But I still have gaping holes in my memory of that final night, and I thank God for that.

Alan Hunter entered the office.

"I hope you don't mind my reading this?" Olivia asked. "It's my family's house."

"Yes," the editor said. "That's one of the reasons I wanted to meet you. I understand you manage Aubrey House now that your cousin Merlyn is gone . . ."

Olivia perched cross-legged on the faded blue bedspread in her faded bathrobe and waited impatiently for her sister to return her call. She lifted her pencil and scrawled in her diary.

APRIL 30 Midnight plus. Too keyed up to sleep. Left message for Des to call no matter when she got in.

Alan Hunter says I should call him Alan. A lovely man. The exquisite good taste to like my poetry. I actually have a chance to be a published Porlock Person. (Droll phrase!) Two conditions. First, that I write a lot more of my cycle, Dreams of Power and Loss. Second, more of my work must appear in "little" magazines. Fortunately, Alan can get some of my verse in Jonathan Brant's magazine, Incisions.

A strange coincidence—I think. Alan took me to lunch with a Porlock author who turned out to be Charles Singleton, the only one who survived Merlyn's fatal visit to Aubrey House. A sweet man, though epicene. Moves with a cane, start and stop like a squirrel. Apparently he is having trouble with the ending of his book—memory lapse. Alan asked oh-so-casually whether Mr. Singleton might be able to visit Aubrey House again. A precondition to my being published? I took no chances, said it could be arranged.

The telephone jangled twice before she could pick it up.

"Des, where in God's name have you been?"

"Ease off, Liv. The weather's great. A bunch of us drove over to the Palisades to see the river."

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"Oh, Jesus," Olivia swore. "I knew this'd happen. You woke Ben. I'll be back. Don't hang up on me."

She cinched her robe and crossed the hall to the old man's room. Ben was on the edge of his bed.

"All right, I'm here. What do you want?"

"What's wrong?" His voice quavered. His face was white. "Who died?"

"Nobody. What do you mean?"

"People don't phone in the middle of the night unless something bad happened."

"Don't be upset." She rested a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "It was a wrong number."

"A wrong number? That's all?" He looked up hopefully. "That's

all?"

"I never lie to you, Ben, that's all it was. Go back to bed."

With a sob of relief, he put his arms round her waist. Olivia endured it awkwardly, caught between pity and embarrassment, but then his hands moved down and clutched her buttocks and he pulled her tight against his face.

"Let me go!"

His grip was strong. Her struggles only increased the intimacy, and even as Olivia writhed in anger and disgust, Ben's hot repeated breath stirred irrelevant fires. When he released her bottom to stroke her breasts, she wrenched free and staggered out of reach. Ben tried to rise, but the effort made him short of breath. He flopped back on the pillows, gasping. When he could speak again, he addressed her in a tone of syrupy wheedling that turned her stomach. "Don't go away, I won't hurt you, honey. Be a good girl and help me, I'm a prisoner, you have to help me. Be a good girl and help me. Please help me."

"For God's sake, stop it, Ben! I'm your daughter."

"Liar!" he bellowed, suddenly vicious. "Daughters don't call their fathers by their first names."

"All right, fine, have it your way, I'm not your daughter. Who am I, then?" Her voice jittered up the scale. "Do you remember?"

His mouth drew into a wreath of contempt. "I remember. You're my dead wife's bastard, that's who you are."

Desdemona was no longer on the line. *Naturally*. Olivia redialed.

"Jee-zus, Liv," Des complained, "do you know how fucking late it is?"

"I asked you not to hang up on me."

"All right, I'm freezing my ass off out here in the hall. What do you want?"

"A favor. Stay with Ben a few weeks this summer."

"No way. I've got plans."

"Just a few weeks. This one is really important to me."

Des played hard to get. "I'd like to help, Liv, but if I change my plans, it'll inconvenience my friends."

"Whereas you don't mind inconveniencing me. Damn it, he's your father, too!" *He's your father.*

"Don't give me guilt trips. I can't handle him the way you

can."

"So I'll teach you. And Mrs. Culloden's always willing to help. Please, Des?" The note of desperation was a tactic; she could practically hear the calculator clicking in her sister's mind.

1:45 a.m. Des agreed. Of course there was a price tag: half June's executor fee for managing Aubrey House. Worth it. She'll take care of Ben and I'll go away and write new poems for Alan. The big question is, where shall I go? There is one obvious place. Isolated. No rent. Only—

Only it was too late and she was too tired to make a major decision. Her mind was filled with the long day's events and impressions: Ben's perennial early morning grief; Alan Hunter's enigmatic smile; Des's predictable selfishness. And threading through it all, a dark skein of sexual desire that stirred at the thought of Alan, that burned in spite of herself when the old man clutched her. A need that shame could not quell.

Seizing her legal pad, Olivia scribbled a new addition to *Dreams of Power and Loss*.

AN OLD MAN

*Prisoned in the prism of corrosion,
Lustful dreams cascade in palisades.
Fling the shriveled blossoms in the snow—
My deadly lover caroled long ago!*

II

In the golden blood of the dying sun, Aubrey House appeared deceptively innocent. Olivia was more or less expecting to see a spacious white-frame mansion, but was quite unprepared for the sprawling enormity of the fact. The place was built with total disregard for the great distances its servants once trekked. Olivia watched the burnished final shafts of day turn all the windows into amber eyes that winked shut, one by one.

Off to the northeast, the old stable waited openmouthed to swallow her, car and all. She nosed Mrs. Culloden's '73 Buick into the farthest of four empty auto bays. Braking to a halt, she cut off the engine. Outside, the evening sky glimmered with sunset's afterglare, but in the garage/stable, sound stopped; the world went black . . . as if some giant hand suddenly smothered car and driver

in cotton wool. Olivia's first impulse was to restart the motor and spend the night in nearby Doylestown, but she willed away her nervousness, got out, groped around the car, and left the garage, flashlight in hand. She'd hoped to arrive earlier in the day, but Ben prevented that by throwing a tantrum when he discovered she was going to leave him.

"Don't you dare walk out that door," he warned.

"You won't be alone."

"I don't care, you're staying right here!"

"I'm leaving, Ben."

"If you do, I won't be here when you come back."

"Where do you think you'll be?"

"Dead. And it'll be your fault."

No use arguing. Nothing Des said helped, either. Olivia had to pretend to change her mind. Des tracked down Mrs. Cullogen, who cajoled Ben into napping. Olivia seized the opportunity. She'd ignored her sister's accusing look and taken off for Pennsylvania.

She stepped along the flagging that led to the main house, picking her way carefully, inspecting the path in front with slow wide-curving sweeps of the flashbeam.

crrkkk

The noise was halfway between a snap and a crunch. Olivia spun round, darted the flash right and left but only succeeded in rearranging the darkness. The long shadows were deep enough to hide an army of hobgoblins. Far off, a lone cricket shrilled. Probably the sound that scared her was a small creature skittering across the flagstones. Probably.

She reached the massive front door of Aubrey House. The key grated in the lock. She knew it would.

Merlyn entrusted me with the house keys. The lock had not been used in some time and it resisted my efforts. The noise it made might have been the opening of Madeline Usher's coffin. I remarked to Drew, "Well, whatever is waiting within certainly knows we're here now."

Damned déjà vu. Maybe I shouldn't've read Singleton's manuscript. Why in hell did I come here?

The huge unlighted entrance foyer was hot, close and forbidding. *No air. Mildew and dust.* The house had an aura of brooding aloofness. She did not feel welcome. *Tolerated, perhaps, but not for long.*

She pried at the darkness with the flashbeam. Dark plank floors and paneled walls, closed oak doors, a wide staircase. Several yards to the left she found the broad arch that opened on the living room/salon. She walked through, groped for and found a light switch.

Most of the furniture was gone, sold to pay Ben's debts. The only objects left in the salon were a liquor sideboard, mercifully still stocked, and a dusty nine-foot Chickering grand piano that jutted from the bay window alcove at the far side of the chamber. The room had a high ceiling, wainscoted walls and a marble mantelpiece that erupted in sinister potbellied cherubs. *Gilded Age grotesqueries*. A black cradle telephone rested on the piano top.

Olivia walked over to the phone. *Okay, Des, I promised I'd call first thing*. She held it to her ear, waited for the dial tone. Nothing. *Damn. Supposed to be working*.

As she hung up, Olivia idly glanced at a folder of sheet music propped on the rack. "When April Comes Again." She began to pick out the melody with one finger, but the instrument was out of tune. She winced and stopped.

The telephone rang.

Flinching at the unexpected noise, she snatched up the receiver.

"Hello?"

A tree branch rapped dry fingers against the side of the house.

"Hello?"

An auto driving by on Route 611 spilled headlight glare on the bay windows.

"Hello?"

She stammered her finger on the hook. No reply. No dial tone.

Her sense of *déjà vu* was still active. *This is how it began for Merlyn and her friends*—with the sexually frustrated Vita Henry claiming the phone woke her at midnight, though no one else heard it *and no wonder, it wasn't hooked up yet, either*.

Okay, Lil Miss Gothic, get hold of yourself. This is a childish case of nerves, that's all.

Granted. But sleeping here tonight will take a huge act of courage, just the same.

Merlyn's old room was spacious, soft and luxurious from the deep-pile carpeting to the contour mattress and downy pillows, but the night was still and oppressive. Olivia had cracked the windows,

but the scent of lavender still heavied the air, a holdover from the time when the chamber belonged to Charlotte Aubrey.

Olivia's muscles ached. She flexed and released them, one group at a time as she rested on the cool top sheet. A gentle lassitude stole over her. The world was silent. A moonbeam slashed the top of a dresser where a rag doll with a faded, lopsided grin lay crumpled.

Her body succumbed to slumber but her mind ran on unchecked. Birthing lines of verse teased her. Characters she might build dream soliloquies upon—a woman, no longer young, a lonely child.

Her back to me.

Olivia gets out of bed and crosses the hall to the nurses' station where her mother sits eating sour cake.

"Mama, he's very sick."

"Patient's name?"

"Benjamin Aubrey."

"Next of kin?"

"No."

Go down that hall, child.

A long empty passageway. Olivia struggles against air thick with lavender. The cold cement floor slopes downward. Above, harsh fluorescent lights buzz and flicker. The doors she passes all are open. On every bed, a corpse covered head to toe with a bloody sheet. The same body in every room.

Let me look upon thy face, O Lord.

Treading on a wilderness of fingers.

ting-ting-ting-ting-ting-ting-ting

The slope angles sharply downward. Slippery. The ceiling recedes.

Hello, little girl. What's your name?

ting-ting-ting-tingRRRRRIIINNNGG

A sudden rush of sensation. Olivia reeled against a wall. The hall went bright. Clad only in nightgown, she stood bare-footed in the second floor corridor just outside the door to the servants' staircase *that Merlyn fell down and broke her neck.*

RRRIIINNNGGG

The telephone ringing in the salon.

She hurried down the great front circular staircase. All the lights were burning because she left them on before going to sleep.

In the salon, she picked up the phone, heard the heavy breathing. Ben.

"Why don't you come back and take care of me? I always took care of you, honey. Please come back please please—"

She slammed the receiver onto its cradle.

"Olivia-a-a-a-a-a . . ."

Mama?

No. She looks into the hall and sees a pretty little girl half in shadow, half in pale blue mist beckoning for Olivia to follow. Yes, *show me the way*. The child falls backward, her mouth opening to scream, but all sound is frozen up in the first chill of morning.

And now it's your turn, bastard.

Daddy?

"Step right up and see the Amazing Broken Woman!"

Ben?

"Watch her eyes come out of their sockets. The small bones of her wrist splintering."

daddy, i lost my hands

With a convulsive shudder, Olivia opens her eyes and finds herself back in bed.

No, stupid, you were never out of bed.

She rises, cinches her robe, dons slippers, walks downstairs, traverses the hall. Unintelligible gibbering. She rushes in, sees him, goes rigid with shock. Sitting naked on the floor, grinning mindlessly. Livid bruises and deep running cuts cover his chest and limbs. His hair is completely white, his eyes bulge horribly.

Olivia slumps against the portal in helpless horror as the thing lurches erect and shambles toward her *oh no please keep away keep away* but the words stick in her throat as the hulking beast falls on her, one knee shoving her thighs apart as the old man clutches her buttocks and Mama and the man whose face she can't see hold hands and smile fondly at her as Olivia screams and screams and—

She opened her eyes. She was still in bed.

Jesus God, when do the nightmares stop?

2 a.m. Still awake. Rain rattling on the roof like marbles. Night outside and in. Complicated bad dreams of Mama and my anonymous daddy with guilt vis-à-vis Ben intermixed. Thought he called at midnight. "I always took care of you." "I won't be here when you come back." Bastard.

Olivia put down her diary and reached for the tenth time for Alan Hunter's letter, the one that arrived just before she left for Pennsylvania.

Dear Ms. Aubrey,

You've been on my mind. Phrases remembered from your poetry reecho: "How many sorrows shall we strangle in the crib?" "Butterfly, perched upon a palm, sips a shape of gold." The quality of the woman implicit in every line. I've shown your work to Jonathan Brant. He's impressed; offers to publish your Kennedy assassination poem in next edition of *Incisions*, which he will deliberately issue on or about November 22. I mentioned your Brontean digs in Pennsylvania. It appealed to his romantic nature. Jonathan needs someplace to lay out miscellaneous paraphernalia (word processor, manuscripts, etc.) to put said issue together. Would you consider allowing him to spend a week at Aubrey House for that purpose? I'd like to join him and so would Chas. Singleton. Perhaps this is a cheeky suggestion, I don't know, but I hope you'll say yes and be on hand as hostess.

Fondly

Alan

P.S. Jonathan sends a copy of his latest sonnet. Hopes you like it as much as he does your work.

She skimmed the last part of the letter again, cheeks flushing. The notion was delicious: a week with Alan *and* Jonathan Brant, *the* Jonathan Brant, her favorite Porlock poet. *Kindred spirit*. She reread the enclosed sonnet.

A PERFECT SHELL

*I searched the beach to seek a perfect shell,
But only found those chips and bits that fell
Where hungry seagulls hurled them high to land
At morning tide upon the salt-smacked sand.
My mind that perfect shell could clearly see;
In vain, my eyes did seek its symmetry.
So, since I cannot bring that gift to you
I hope this crafted shell of words might do.*

*Like shells, our souls at birth are whole and free,
But all too soon are stolen from the sea,
And though the heart a noble start has planned,*

Too often it lies broken on the sand.

Then let us lie, who love each other well,

And say we see in each a perfect shell.

And that, my dear Lil Miss Laureate, is how you ought to write—simple and direct and I'll bet Alan likes this sonnet, too.

Whoa . . . why should it matter one way or the other what Alan likes?

Because and shut up.

Olivia picked up her diary, put it down again, took up the legal pad she always kept close to her bedside in case of surprise visits from the Muse. She wrestled with an attempt to create a sonnet in the style of Jonathan Brant. After the better part of an hour she regarded her efforts with grim displeasure.

TO A KINDRED SPIRIT

(Composed in a lonely house on a stormy night)

How can I want a man I do not know?

But in this haunted house, beset by storm,

The power of your craft has kept me warm—

Although the darkness waits for me, I know,

And I may weep before this wish is cold:

To want to want to solve your mystery

In spite of dangers that are history.

The thorns and barbs of hope are cruel and cold—

I've run them through my flesh, and so have you.

I swore I would not bleed for love again,

Or seek a joy that ends in endless pain—

Yet can I shun the wonder that is you?

O, if you cast dispelling spells on me,

I fear I would not strive to struggle free.

Is this really for Jonathan Brant? Or Alan?

Makes no never mind. Some truly lousy diction, O.

Three a.m. Wonder what Mr. Alan Hunter is doing now? Sleeping, dummy, what else? Why do I think of him so often? I only met him once, yet I toy with the notion that he matters. Romantic foolishness. But I wrote him a sonnet. Yes. Can't polish it. Insufficient technique. Who said something unfinished is a golem? Isaac Singer? Best stick to short forms. Newest power/loss dream only three lines—

A SIREN

*Where coral splits the rosy sea
I cupped my hands and drank cold water
All the long line his fingers fall.*

Eyelids finally growing heavy. Maybe I can actually sleep?

The sound of churning water. Murmuring nearby, a woman's voice that she almost recognizes. Olivia cannot see, but a gentle hand guides her into the whirlpool. Hot water swirls over ankles and calves, over her intimate parts. The soft insistent press of warm lips on her naked breast. Tongue tip lapping nipple.

The woman's voice again?

"Oh, God, Jay, love me!"

Mama?

"Lower, Jay. Deeper."

The last entry of Phyllis Burton, medium, in her diary the night before her fatal séance:

"We were so wrong. It's lower. Deeper."

Mama tossing on her sickbed with dementing fever telling secrets never meant for Olivia's ears.

... pregnant ... yours, Jay ... Ben thinks ...

Ben knows, Mama.

The lights go on.

Vortex. Water down the drain spinning and wheel slows as the croupier takes chips away from her.

"Black. You lose."

The wheel spins.

"Black. You lose."

The wheel spins.

"Black. You lose."

No more money. Des takes it all, sticks out her tongue and sound stops. The crowd disappears. Des turns her back, is gone.

Empty casino. No. One wheel starts to turn. Olivia crosses an enormous room strewn with pianos and boxes of old clothes. The turning circle stops. Two crossbeams that end in wide mouths opening and closing.

Kissing.

Vortex.

"Follow me. Collect your winnings." Olivia feels the voice against her thighs. The gaping archway. Down a long sloping hallway past slabs bearing men covered with bloody sheets.

The crossbeams spin.

In one room, a corpse comes erect.

Alan?

She runs toward him, but the floor tilts down like a coal chute, dumping her into the basement *and all the long line his fingers fall* treading a wilderness of.

DIES IRAE, DIES ILLA

SOLVET SAECLUM IN FAVILLA

Bright light splashes down from stained glass groins. A solemn voice intones Latin.

QUANTUS TREMOR EST FUTURUS

QUANDO JUDEX EST VENTURUS

The cathedral darkens. Not the sun. The dying light from hundreds of candles sticking out of sconces. They gutter, one by one, and go out. On the altar, a pine box nestles on crossbeams.

INGEMISCO TAMQUAM REUS

The lid lifts.

CULPA RUBET VULTUS MEUS

Your name is Olivia?

Daddy?

The coffin opens with a crash. A corpse glowing sickly blue drifts out, soars over her head, swivels perpendicularly in the air. A filthy old man, naked. Fingernails at least a foot long, each curving to a sharp point.

Daddy?

ME, BASTARD.

Ben's hands stretch out sideways like crucified Jesus. His gigantic penis stands erect as he flies at Olivia with hideous speed. She tries to scream, but his rotting mouth stops her. His swollen tongue prods between her teeth. Her throat burns. She shoves him off, but he comes back. Again. His member stabs at the lips of her sex. Olivia twists aside and sees that the long curved daggers at the ends of his hands are not fingernails but sharp knives. She catches at them, jerks them toward his body. The old man thrashes in terror. Fighting for each gained inch, Olivia bends the points inward till with one great convulsive thrust, she forces them into Ben's chest.

BITCH!



His scream fades. The old man goes limp. His head lolls over the crook of her elbow. Cold morning. The church is cold, empty and she mourns and curses Ben and—

No! My pieta!

—and then she woke.

Darkness.

The cold breath whispered up her legs. She went stiff, afraid to move.

Oh God, I know where I am.

Olivia extended her hands to either side and touched two walls. She slid one foot forward, guessing that somewhere not far ahead the floor stopped and the servants' staircase descended at a steep angle *where Merlyn pitched down and broke her neck.*

But the nightmare was over at last. She inched her way backward till her shoulder nudged the door connecting with the upstairs corridor. She pushed through. The hallway was suffused with early morning light. She looked at a discolored patch of wallpaper near the entranceway to the servants' staircase. *This is where it is. The cold blue light. The "Aubrey Effect."*

Downstairs, the telephone was ringing. Olivia stiffened. *But it's daylight.*

BRRRRIINNNGG

She rushed down the front stairs and into the living room.

BRRRII—

"Yes, hello?"

A real voice. "Hi, kiddo, it's me."

"Mrs. Culloden?"

"One and the same. Look, hon, are you sittin' down?"

"Wh-what's wrong?"

"It's your father. He's dead."

A long silence.

"He did it himself."

A longer silence.

"How?"

"Your sister was trying to reach you on the phone. Line wasn't working yet, I guess. Anyway, she didn't see Ben sneak downstairs. Went to the kitchen, got a steak knife."

Olivia's breath caught. "And . . . and then?"

"Sure you want t' hear?"

"Yes."

"Cut himself twice. Each side of the chest. Real messy." Olivia could hear Mrs. Culloden exhaling noisily. "Anyway, Des is a basket case. You better come home."

"Right."

"Drive safe."

The lush Pennsylvania countryside fled, was replaced by New Jersey's paler green. Minutes and miles bled drop by drop into the past.

I refuse to feel guilty, Ben. No more mornings when you don't know where you are or who I am or why Mama isn't with us any more. Maybe you did the smart thing. No more pain.

("I always took care of you.")

I refuse to feel guilty.

But the fantasies were done for good. No playing hostess to Alan Hunter or Jonathan Brant or Charles Singleton. *All dreams canceled on account of suicide*, but what did that matter? No real difference whether she composed poetry or washed dishes or collected garbage. Existence arbitrary. No fixed final meanings, nothing to trust in or believe and she still could not imagine why she'd come to Aubrey House in the first place, and yet the cold blue light had read Olivia like a reverse Rorschach, the inkblot interpreting the patient. It gave her exactly what she really wanted.

Wonder whether Ben mentioned me in his will? What's the going rate nowadays for a dead wife's bastard?

Two Poems

by TOM DISCH

Two nightmares
for the nineties.

In the News

Last night I dreamt that Bernhard Goetz
Was slumming in Bhopal,
And the Vatican Bank was taking bets
On who'll succeed Pope Paul.

Arkansas teachers were cheating on tests
To see if they had AIDS,
And the Bronx was issuing bulletproof vests
To students in lower grades.

The weather was warm, and interest rates
Were climbing higher and higher,
Because some U.S. consulates
Were said to be on fire.

A bomb had fallen on southern France,
And for a second time
The nation had renewed the grants
Of families in major crime.

The Pair of Them

He wasn't crying to get out,
But whining, weakly, *Let me in.*

The other, suffering from gout,
Turned a deaf ear to one so thin.

He cleared his throat and tried to shout:
Wine will undo you! Eat to win!

The fat man laughed, and switched to stout,
Which dribbled round his triple chin.

*You pig! you blimp! go stuff your snout
Into a tun and drown in gin!*

Fats spoke at last: What's this about?
Who's making this ill-mannered din—

And at my dinner hour? Lout!
But no, it can't be! Not . . . *my twin?*

The thin man smiled, and I've no doubt
That he was answered by a grin.

Profile: Rudyard Kipling

by WILLIAM RELLING JR.

A master
of the Tale Well Told.

Joseph Rudyard Kipling was born on December 30, 1865, in Bombay, India, the first child of sculptor John Lockwood Kipling and his wife Alice. The couple had moved to India the previous spring, following John Kipling's appointment to a teaching position at an art school. From the beginning the boy was known as "Rudyard" or "Ruddy"; the name commemorated Lake Rudyard, the place in England where his parents met. His mother first took him to England when he was two and a half years old, there to await the birth of her second child, Kipling's sister Alice. (The younger Alice was called "Trix" so as to avoid confusion.) Mrs. Kipling came back with her children to India, where they remained for the next three years.

In 1871, the entire family returned to England, and in December of that year, Kipling and his sister were sent away to Lorne Lodge, a foster home that doubled as a boarding school. It was common practice among middle-class British families at the time to send their children away to be educated. Apparently, the next six years of Kipling's life were his most unhappy; Kipling's parents and their native servants back in Bombay had spoiled him, and "Auntie Rosa" Holloway—the mistress of Lorne Lodge—was no Indian *memsahib* who would give in to his whims. She had little tolerance for Kipling's temper tantrums, and she tended to treat him tyrannically. (Though not nearly so badly as Kipling would later attest;

in his short story "Baa, Baa, Black Sheep" the antagonist has the same name as Auntie Rosa, and Kipling describes her persecution of him in angry—but not entirely objective—detail. He referred to the fictionalized Lorne Lodge as the "House of Desolation.")

Kipling's mother removed him and his sister from Auntie Rosa's care in 1877, and the following year he was sent to the United Services College, a prep school in the north-Devon seaside resort Westward Ho! At first it seemed to Kipling as if he had gone from bad to worse: Kipling was one of several boys who were treated badly by the school's chaplain, a man named J. C. Campbell. Campbell could have been a villain out of Charles Dickens; he was, according to Kipling's biographer, Lord Birkenhead, a man "like so many of his kind who combined emotional sentimentality with a keen enjoyment in the infliction of corporal punishment." Fortunately, Campbell left the college after the end of Kipling's first year, and things improved, though only a little; his memories of Westward Ho!, fictionalized in his novel *Stalky & Co.* (published in 1899), are primarily grim, recalling the bullying he suffered at the hands of some older students. What is most important about Kipling's prep school days, however, is that it was while he was at Westward Ho! that he cultivated an interest in literature—in particular, a taste for American writers like Emerson and Poe and Bret Harte and Mark Twain. It was also while he was at prep school that Kipling began to write: mostly poems that he included in his letters to his family.

John Kipling was apparently impressed with his son's literary talent, and in 1882 Rudyard Kipling left school to return to India, to a newspaper job that his father had found for him. (Kipling's parents had gone back to India a few years earlier, after John Kipling had been appointed curator of a museum in Lahore, a city in the northwest corner of the country.) For the next five years, Kipling worked for an English-language newspaper in Lahore, the *Civil and Military Gazette*. In addition to conventional journalism, Kipling wrote poems and short stories for the paper; *Departmental Ditties* (1886), his first book, was primarily made up of work originally published in the *Gazette*. In 1887, Kipling took a job as editor of a rival newspaper, the *Allahabad Pioneer*, where he wrote most of the stories that were subsequently collected in his book, *The Phantom Rickshaw* (1889).

Kipling abandoned newspaper work for good in 1889 and returned to England, where his fame preceded him; already at age

twenty-four he was arguably the most popular writer in the country. By 1890 he was equally famous in the United States; his first novel, *The Light That Failed*, and his story collections *Soldiers Three* and *Wee Willie Winkie*, all published that year, were as successful in America as they were in England. So much so, in fact, that Kipling and his American wife Carrie moved to the U.S., to Brattleboro, Vermont, in February of 1892, a month after their marriage.

The Kiplings stayed in Vermont for four and a half years, and while later in his life Kipling would remember his years in America with some bitterness—a result of a falling out he'd had with one of his in-laws—it was while he was living here that he wrote some of his most famous work, including *The Jungle Book* (1894) and *Captains Courageous* (1896). In 1896, Kipling brought his family back to England. (His daughters Josephine and Elsie had been born while he and his wife were in Vermont; his son John was born in England in 1898.) Though he continued to travel, Kipling lived in England till his death.

From 1897 to 1914, Kipling's popularity never flagged—he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1907—and he continued to write at an amazing pace. But two things finally slowed him down: the ill-health that had plagued him on and off since he had suffered a near-fatal bout with pneumonia in 1899, and the advent of the First World War, which exacerbated his feelings of displeasure with the British government—feelings that originally had been fostered more than a decade before as a consequence of what he felt to be the government's inept handling of the Boer War in South Africa. Kipling also grieved the death of his son, who was killed while fighting in France in 1915.

He continued to work, however, up to a few days before he died on January 18, 1936—less than a month after his seventieth birthday. His body was cremated, and his ashes laid to rest in the Poet's Corner at Westminster Abbey.

If you are acquainted only with Kipling's more famous work—*The Jungle Book* or *Kim*; "Danny Deeve" or "Gunga Din"; "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" or "The Man Who Would Be King"—then you might be unaware that Kipling wrote a host of what critic and novelist Kingsley Amis, another of Kipling's biographers, called his "tales of the macabre." It's possible that one or more of Kipling's horror stories may come to mind fairly easily: "The Phantom Rick-

shaw" is likely to be a familiar title, even if you do not recall what the story itself was about. But in general Kipling's horror stories seem to have attracted less attention than has most of his writing.

Why that is, it's difficult to say. It certainly isn't the quality of the stories: "My Own True Ghost Story" and "The House Surgeon" are two of many fine Kipling tales of spectral encounters; "At the Pit's Mouth" (wonderful Lovecraftian title, that) possesses a nasty denouement worthy of Ambrose Bierce; "The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes" is a not-so-distant British cousin to Poe's "The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym." And at least one of Kipling's tales, "The Mark of the Beast," is an archetypal story of horror, as much a seminal work of the genre as "The Tell-Tale Heart" or "The Monkey's Paw." (As an aside: it's interesting to note that writer Curt Siodmak borrowed from "The Mark of the Beast" for his screenplay "The Wolf-Man," written nearly fifty years after Kipling's story was first published. If that doesn't make "Beast" an archetype, I don't know what will.)

Perhaps it has to do with the fact that Rudyard Kipling has long been something of an odd case, literarily speaking. His critical popularity—during his lifetime and especially in the decades since his death in 1936—has waxed and waned, and at any given point in time—for example, now in the late 1980s—it can be hard to judge Kipling's position in the literary pantheon. Consequently, if his "great" work is receiving little attention these days, it follows that his "genre" work will receive even less.

Whatever the reason, his work still holds up to reading. Far more often than not a Kipling horror story, like the rest of his fiction, is simply a Good Tale Well Told; no story needs to be more than that. But the best argument for reading Kipling that I've seen was written by Kingsley Amis in his book *Rudyard Kipling and his World*. According to Amis: "Among the great volume of [Kipling's] work, a perhaps unexpectedly large amount can now be seen to be of the highest quality. With all his breadth there were the gift of distilling a whole thought into a few memorable words. He is clearly our best writer of short stories. His range is wide: the tragic, the comic, the satiric, the macabre, anecdote, fantasy, history, science fiction, children's tale. And he cuts deep. What if he never explored some emotions and some parts of experience? The ones he threw open are a more than sufficient compensation."

The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes

by RUDYARD KIPLING

The ragged spectators actually laughed at me — such laughter I hope I may never hear again.

Alive or dead—there is no other way.

—*Native Proverb*

There is no invention about this tale. Jukes by accident stumbled upon a village that is well known to exist, though he is the only Englishman who has been there. A somewhat similar institution used to flourish on the outskirts of Calcutta, and there is a story that if you go into the heart of Bikanir, which is in the heart of the Great Indian Desert, you shall come across not a village but a town where the Dead who did not die but may not live have established their headquarters. And, since it is perfectly true that in the same Desert is a wonderful city where all the rich money lenders retreat after they have made their fortunes (fortunes so vast that the owners cannot trust even the strong hand of the Government to protect them, but take refuge in the waterless sands), and drive sumptuous C-spring barouches, and buy beautiful girls and decorate their palaces with gold and ivory and Minton tiles and mother-o'-pearl, I do not see why Jukes's tale should not be true. He is a Civil Engineer, with a head of plans and distances and things of that kind, and he certainly would not take the trouble to invent imaginary traps. He could earn more by doing his legitimate work. He never varies the tale in the telling, and grows very hot and indignant when he thinks of the disrespectful treatment he

received. He wrote this quite straightforwardly at first, but he has touched it up in places and introduced Moral Reflections: thus:—

In the beginning it all arose from a slight attack of fever. My work necessitated me being in camp for some months between Pakpattan and Mubarakpur—a desolate sandy stretch of country as every one who has had the misfortune to go there may know. My coolies were neither more nor less exasperating than any other gangs, and my work demanded sufficient attention to keep me from moping, had I been inclined to so unmanly a weakness.

On the twenty-third December 1884 I felt a little feverish. There was a full moon at the time, and, in consequence, every dog near my tent was baying it. The brutes assembled in twos and threes and drove me frantic. A few days previously I had shot one loud-mouthed singer and suspended his carcass *in terrorem* about fifty yards from my tent-door, but his friends fell upon, fought for, and ultimately devoured the body: and, as it seemed to me, sang their hymns of thanksgiving afterward with renewed energy.

The light-headedness which accompanies fever acts differently on different men. My irritation gave way, after a short time, to a fixed determination to slaughter one huge black and white beast who had been foremost in song and first in flight throughout the evening. Thanks to a shaking hand and a giddy head I had already missed him twice with both barrels of my shotgun, when it struck me that my best plan would be to ride him down in the open and finish him off with a hog-spear. This, of course, was merely the semi-delirious notion of a fever-patient; but I remember that it struck me at the time as being eminently practical and feasible.

I therefore ordered my groom to saddle Pornic and bring him round quietly to the rear of my tent. When the pony was ready, I stood at his head prepared to mount and dash out as soon as the dog should again lift up his voice. Pornic, by the way, had not been out of his pickets for a couple of days; the night air was crisp and chilly; and I was armed with a specially long and sharp pair of persuaders with which I had been rousing a sluggish cob that afternoon. You will easily believe, then, that when he was let go he went quickly. In one moment, for the brute bolted as straight as a die, the tent was left far behind, and we were flying over the smooth sandy soil at racing speed. In another we had passed the wretched dog, and I had almost forgotten why it was that I had taken horse and hog-spear.

The delirium of fever and the excitement of rapid motion

through the air must have taken away the remnant of my senses. I have a faint recollection of standing upright in my stirrups, and of brandishing my hog-spear at the great white Moon that looked down so calmly on my mad gallop; and of shouting challenges to the camelthorn bushes as they whizzed past. Once or twice, I believe, I swayed forward on the Pornic's neck, and literally hung on by my spurs—as the marks next morning showed.

The wretched beast went forward like a thing possessed, over what seemed to be a limitless expanse of moonlit sand. Next, I remember, the ground rose suddenly in front of us, and as we topped the ascent I saw the waters of the Sutlej shining like a silver bar below. Then Pornic blundered heavily on his nose, and we rolled together down some unseen slope.

I must have lost consciousness, for when I recovered I was lying on my stomach in a heap of soft white sand, and the dawn was beginning to break dimly over the edge of the slope down which I had fallen. As the light grew stronger I saw I was at the bottom of a horseshoe-shaped crater of sand, opening on one side directly on to the shoals of the Sutlej. My fever had altogether left me, and, with the exception of a slight dizziness in the head, I felt no bad effects from the fall over night.

Pornic, who was standing a few yards away, was naturally a good deal exhausted, but had not hurt myself in the least. His saddle, a favorite polo one, was much knocked about, and had been twisted under his belly. It took me some time to put him to rights, and in the meantime I had ample opportunities of observing the spot into which I had so foolishly dropped.

At the risk of being considered tedious, I must describe it at length; inasmuch as an accurate mental picture of its peculiarities will be of material assistance in enabling the reader to understand what follows.

Imagine then, as I have said before, a horseshoe-shaped crater of sand with steeply-graded sand walls about thirty-five feet high. (The slope, I fancy, must have been about 65° .) This crater enclosed a level piece of ground about fifty yards long by thirty at its broadest part, with a rude well in the center. Round the bottom of the crater, about three feet from the level of the ground proper, ran a series of eighty-three semicircular, ovoid, square, and multilateral holes, all about three feet at the mouth. Each hole on inspection showed that it was carefully shored internally with driftwood and bamboos, and over the mouth a wooden drip board projected, like

the peak of a jockey's cap, for two feet. No sign of life was visible in these tunnels, but a most sickening stench pervaded the entire amphitheater—a stench fouler than any which my wanderings in Indian villages have introduced me to.

Having remounted Pornic, who was anxious as I to get back to camp, I rode round the base of the horseshoe to find some place whence an exit would be practicable. The inhabitants, whoever they might be, had not thought fit to put in an appearance, so I was left to my own devices. My first attempt to "rush" Pornic up the steep sand banks showed me that I fallen into a trap exactly on the same model as that which the ant lion sets for its prey. At each step the shifting sand poured down from above in tons, and rattled on the drop boards of the holes like small shot. A couple of ineffectual charges sent us both rolling down to the bottom, half choked with the torrents of sand; and I was constrained to turn my attention to the river bank.

Here everything seemed easy enough. The sand hills ran down to the river edge, it is true, but there were plenty of shoals and shallows across which I could gallop Pornic, and find my way back to *terra firma* by turning sharply to the right or the left. As I led Pornic over the sands I was startled by the faint pop of a rifle across the river; and at the same moment a bullet dropped with a sharp *whit* close to Pornic's head.

There was no mistaking the nature of the missile—a regulation Martini-Henry "picket." About five hundred yards away a country boat was anchored in midstream; and a jet of smoke drifting away from its bows in the still morning air showed me whence the delicate attention had come. Was ever a respectable gentleman in such an *impasse*? The treacherous sand slope allowed no escape from a spot which I had visited most involuntarily, and a promenade on the river frontage was the signal for a bombardment from some insane native in a boat. I'm afraid that I lost my temper very much indeed.

Another bullet reminded me that I had better save my breath to cool my porridge; and I retreated hastily up the sands and back to the horseshoe, where I saw the nose of the rifle had drawn sixty-five human beings from the badger holes which I had up till that point supposed to be untenanted. I found myself in the midst of a crowd of spectators—about forty men, twenty women, and one child who could not have been more than five years old. They were all scantily clothed in that salmon-colored cloth which one

associates with Hindu mendicants, and, at first sight, gave me the impression of a band of loathsome *fakirs*. The filth and repulsiveness of the assembly were beyond all description, and I shuddered to think what their life in the badger holes must be.

Even in these days, when local self-government had destroyed the greater part of a native's respect for a Sahib, I have been accustomed to a certain amount of civility from my inferiors, and on approaching the crowd naturally expected that there would be some recognition of my presence. As a matter of fact there was; but it was by no means what I had looked for.

The ragged crew actually laughed at me—such laughter I hope I may never hear again. They cackled, yelled, whistled, and howled as I walked into their midst; some of them literally throwing themselves down on the ground in convulsions of unholy mirth. In a moment I had let go Pornic's head, and, irritated beyond expression at the morning's adventure, commenced cuffing those nearest to me with all the force I could. The wretches dropped under my blows like ninepins, and the laughter gave place to wails for mercy; while those yet untouched clasped me around the knees, imploring me in all sorts of uncouth tongues to spare them.

In the tumult, and just when I was feeling very much ashamed of myself for having thus easily given way to my temper, a thin, high voice murmured in English from behind my shoulder: "Sahib! Sahib! Do you not know me? Sahib, it is Gunga Dass, the telegraph master."

I spun round quickly and faced the speaker.

Gunga Dass (I have, of course, no hesitation in mentioning the man's real name) I had known four years before as a Deccanee Brahmin lent by the Punjab Government to one of the Khalsia States. He was in charge of a branch telegraph office there, and when I had last met him was a jovial, full-stomached, portly Government servant with a marvellous capacity for making bad puns in English—a peculiarity which made me remember him long after I had forgotten his services to me in his official capacity. It is seldom that a Hindu makes English puns.

Now, however, the man was changed beyond all recognition. Caste-mark, stomach, slate-colored continuations, and unctuous speech were all gone. I looked at a withered skeleton, turbanless and almost naked, with long matted hair and deep-set codfish eyes. But for a crescent-shaped scar on the left cheek—the result of an accident for which I was responsible—I should never have known

him. But it was indubitably Gunga Dass, and—for this I was thankful—an English-speaking native who might at least tell me the meaning of all that I had gone through that day.

The crowd retreated to some distance as I turned toward the miserable figure, and ordered him to show me some method of escaping from the crater. He held a freshly plucked crow in his hand, and in reply to my question climbed slowly on a platform of sand which ran in front of the hole, and commenced lighting a fire there in silence. Dried bents, sand-poppies, and driftwood burn quickly, and I derived much consolation from the fact that he lit them with an ordinary sulphur match. When they were in a bright glow, and the crow was neatly splitted in front thereof, Gunga Dass began without a word of preamble—

"There are only two kinds of men, Sar. The alive and the dead. When you are dead you are dead, but when you are alive you live." (Here the crow demanded his attention for an instant as it twirled before the fire in danger of being burnt to a cinder.) "If you die at home, and do not die when you come to the ghât to be burnt, you come here."

The nature of the reeking village was made plain now, and all that I had known or read of the grotesque and the horrible paled before the fact just communicated by the ex-Brahmin. Sixteen years ago, when I first landed in Bombay, I had been told by a wandering Armenian of the existence, somewhere in India, of a place to which such Hindus as had the misfortune to recover from trance or catalepsy were conveyed and kept, and I recollect laughing heartily at what I was then pleased to consider a traveler's tale. Sitting at the bottom of the sand trap, the memory of Watson's Hotel, with its swinging punkahs, white-robed servants, and the sallow-faced Armenian, rose up in my mind as vividly as a photograph, and I burst into a loud fit of laughter. The contrast was too absurd!

Gunga Dass, as he bent over the unclean bird, watched me curiously. Hindus seldom laugh, and his surroundings were not such as to move him that way. He removed the crow solemnly from the wooden spit and as solemnly devoured it. Then he continued his story, which I give in his own words:—

"In epidemics of the cholera you are carried to be burnt almost before you are dead. When you come to the riverside the cold air, perhaps, makes you alive, and then, if you are only little alive, mud is put on your nose and mouth and you die conclusively. If you are rather more alive, more mud is put; but if you are too

lively they let you go and take you away. I was too lively, and made protestation with anger against the indignities that they endeavored to press upon me. In those days I was Brahmin and proud man. Now I am dead man and eat—" here he eyed the well-gnawed breast bone with the first sign of emotion that I had seen in him since we met "—crows, and—other things. They took me from my sheets when they saw that I was too lively and gave me medicines for one week, and I survived successfully. Then they sent me by rail from my place to Okara Station, with a man to take care of me; and at Okara Station we met two other men, and they conducted us three on camels, in the night, from Okara Station to this place, and they propelled me from the top to the bottom, and the other two succeeded, and I have been here ever since two and a half years. Once I was Brahmin and proud man, and now I eat crows."

"There is no way of getting out?"

"None of what kind at all. When I first came I made experiments frequently and all the others also, but we have always succumbed to the sand which is precipitated upon our heads."

"But surely," I broke in at this point, "the river front is open, and it is worth while dodging the bullet; while at night—"

I had already matured a rough plan of escape which a natural instinct of selfishness forbade me sharing with Gunga Dass. He, however, divined my unspoken thought almost as soon as it was formed; and, to my intense astonishment, gave vent to a long low chuckle of derision—the laughter, be it understood, of a superior or at least of an equal.

"You will not—" he had dropped the Sir after his first sentence—"make any escape that way. But you can try. I have tried. Once only."

The sensation of nameless terror which I had in vain attempted to strive against overmastered me completely. My long fast—it was now close upon ten o'clock, and I had eaten nothing since tiffin on the previous day—combined with the violent agitation of the ride had exhausted me, and I verily believe that, for a few minutes, I acted as one mad. I hurled myself against the sand slope. I ran round the base of the crater, blaspheming and praying by turns. I crawled out among the sedges of the river front, only to be driven back each time in an agony of nervous dread by the rifle bullets which cut up the sand round me—for I dared not face the death of a mad dog among that hideous crowd—and so fell, spent and

raving, at the curb of the well. No one had taken the slightest notice of an exhibition which makes me blush hotly even when I think of it now.

Two or three men trod on my panting body as they threw water, but they were evidently used to this sort of thing, and had no time to waste upon me. Gunga Dass, indeed, when he had banked the embers of his fire with sand, was at some pains to throw half a cupful of fetid water over my head, an attention for which I could have fallen on my knees and thanked him, but he was laughing all the while in the same mirthless, wheezy key that greeted me on my first attempt to force the shoals. And so, in a half-fainting state, I lay till noon. Then, being only a man after all, I felt hungry, and said as much to Gunga Dass, whom I had begun to regard as my natural protector. Following the impulse of the outer world when dealing with natives, I put my hand into my pocket and drew out four annas. The absurdity of the gift struck me at once, and I was about to replace the money.

Gunga Dass, however, cried: "Give me the money, all you have, or I will get help, and we will kill you!"

A Briton's first impulse, I believe, is to guard the contents of his pockets; but a moment's thought showed me of the folly of differing with the one man who had it in his power to make me comfortable; and with whose help it was possible that I might eventually escape from the crater. I gave him all the money in my possession, Rs. 9-8-5—nine rupees, eight annas, and five pie—for I always keep small change as *bakshish* when I am in camp. Gunga Dass clutched the coins, and hid them at once in his ragged loin-cloth, looking round to assure himself that no one had observed us.

"Now I will give you something to eat," said he.

What pleasure my money could have given him I am unable to say; but inasmuch as it did please him I was not sorry that I had parted with it so readily, for I had no doubt that he would have had me killed if I had refused. One does not protest against the doings of a den of wild beasts; and my companions were lower than any beasts. While I ate what Gunga Dass had provided, a coarse *chapatti* and a cupful of the foul well water, the people showed not the faintest sign of curiosity—that curiosity which is so rampant, as a rule, in an Indian village.

I could even fancy that they despised me. At all events they treated me with the most chilling indifference, and Gunga Dass was nearly as bad. I plied him with questions about the terrible

village, and received extremely unsatisfactory answers. So far as I could gather, it had been in existence from time immemorial—whence I concluded that it was at least a century old—and during that time no one had ever been known to escape from it. [I had to control myself here with both hands, lest the blind terror should lay hold of me a second time and drive me racing round the crater.] Gunga Dass took a malicious pleasure in emphasizing this point and in watching me wince. Nothing that I could do would induce him to tell me who the mysterious "They" were.

"It is so ordered," he would reply, "and I do not yet know any one who has disobeyed the orders."

"Only wait till my servant finds that I am missing," I retorted, "and I promise you that this place shall be cleared off the face of the earth, and I'll give you a lesson in civility, too, my friend."

"Your servants would be torn in pieces before they ever came near this place; and, besides, you are dead, my dear friend. It is not your fault, of course, but none the less you are dead *and* buried."

At irregular intervals supplies of food, I was told, were dropped down from the land side into the amphitheatre, and the inhabitants fought for them like wild beasts. When a man felt his death coming on he retreated to his lair and died there. The body was sometimes dragged out of the hole and thrown on to the sand, or allowed to rot where it lay.

The phrase "thrown on to the sand" caught my attention, and I asked Gunga Dass whether this sort of thing was not likely to produce a pestilence.

"That," said he, with another one of his wheezy chuckles, "you may see for yourself subsequently. You will have much time to make observations."

Whereat, to his great delight, I winced once more and hastily continued the conversation: "And how do you live here from day to day? What do you do?" The question elicited exactly the same answer as before—coupled with the information that "this place is like your European heaven; there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage."

Gunga Dass had been educated at a Mission School, and, as he himself admitted, had he only changed his religion "like a wise man," might have avoided the living grave which was now his portion. But as long as I was with him I fancy he was happy.

Here was a Sahib, a representative of the dominant race, helpless

as a child and completely at the mercy of his native neighbors. In a deliberate lazy way he set himself to torture me as a schoolboy would devote a rapturous half-hour to watching the agonies of an impaled beetle, or as a ferret in a blind burrow might glue himself comfortably to the neck of a rabbit. The burden of his conversation was that there was no escape "of no kind whatever," and that I should stay here till I died and was "thrown on to the sand." If it were possible to forejudge the conversation of the Damned on the advent of a new soul in their abode, I should say that they would speak as Gunga Dass did to me throughout that long afternoon. I was powerless to protest or answer; all my energies being devoted to a struggle against the inexplicable terror that threatened to overwhelm me again and again. I can compare the feeling to nothing except the struggle of a man against the overpowering nausea of the Channel passage—only my agony was of the spirit and infinitely more terrible.

As the day wore on, the inhabitants began to appear in full strength to catch the rays of the afternoon sun, which were now sloping in at the mouth of the crater. They assembled by little knots, and talked among themselves without even throwing a glance in my direction. About four o'clock, so far as I could judge, Gunga Dass rose and dived into his lair for a moment, emerging with a live crow in his hands. The wretched bird was in a most dragged and deplorable condition, but seemed to be in no way afraid of its master. Advancing cautiously to the river-front, Gunga Dass stepped from tussock to tussock until he had reached a smooth patch of sand directly in the line of the boat's fire. The occupants of the boat took no notice. Here he stopped, and, with a couple of dexterous turns of the wrist, pegged the bird on its back with outstretched wings. As was only natural, the crow began to shriek at once and beat the air with its claws. In a few seconds the clamour had attracted the attention of a bevy of wild crows on a shoal a few hundred yards away, where they were discussing something that looked like a corpse. Half a dozen crows flew over at once to see what was going on, and also, as it proved, to attack the pinioned bird. Gunga Dass, who had lain down on a tussock, motioned to me to be quiet, though I fancy this was a needless precaution. In a moment, and before I could see how it happened, a wild crow, who had grappled with the shrieking and helpless bird, was entangled in the latter's claws, swiftly disengaged by Gunga Dass, and pegged down beside its companion in adversity.

Curiosity, it seemed, overpowered the rest of the flock, and almost before Gunga Dass and I had time to withdraw to the tussock, two more captives were struggling in the upturned claws of the decoys. So the chase—if I can give it so dignified a name—continued till Gunga Dass had captured seven crows. Five of them he throttled at once, reserving two for further operations another day. I was a good deal impressed by this, to me, novel method of securing food, and complimented Gunga Dass on his skill.

"It is nothing to do," said he. "Tomorrow you must do it for me. You are stronger than I am."

This calm assumption of superiority upset me not a little, and I answered peremptorily: "Indeed, you old ruffian? What do you think I have given you money for?"

"Very well," was the unmoved reply. "Perhaps not tomorrow, nor the day after, nor subsequently; but in the end, and for many years, you will catch crows and eat crows; and you will thank your European God that you have crows to catch and eat."

I could have cheerfully strangled him for this; but judged it best under the circumstances to smother my resentment. An hour later I was eating one of the crows; and, as Gunga Dass had said, thanking my God that I had a crow to eat. Never as long as I live shall I forget that evening meal. The whole population were squatting on the hard sand platform opposite their dens, huddled over tiny fires of refuse and dried rushes. Death, having once laid his hand upon these men and forborne to strike, seemed to stand aloof from them now; for most of our company were old men, bent and worn and twisted with years; and woman aged to all appearance as the Fates themselves. They sat together in knots and talked—God only knows what they found to discuss—in low equable tones, curiously in contrast to the strident babble with which natives are accustomed to make day hideous. Now and then an excess of that sudden fury which had possessed me in the morning would lay hold on a man and woman; and with yells and imprecations the sufferer would attack the steep slope until, baffled and bleeding, he fell back on the platform incapable of moving a limb. The others would never even raise their eyes when this happened, as men too well aware of the futility of their fellows' attempts and wearied with their useless repetition. I saw four such outbursts in the course of that evening.

Gunga Dass took an eminently business-like view of my situation, and while we were dining—I can afford to laugh at the

recollection now, but it was painful enough at the time—pro-pounded the terms of which he would consent to 'do' for me. My nine rupees eight annas, he argued, at the rate of three annas a day, would provide me with food for fifty-one days, or about seven weeks; that is to say, he would be willing to cater for me for that length of time. At the end of it I was to look after myself. For a further consideration—*videlicet* my boots—he would be willing to allow me to occupy the den next to his own, and would supply me with as much dried grass for bedding as he could spare.

"Very well, Gunga Dass," I replied; "to the first terms I cheerfully agree, but, as there is nothing on earth to prevent me killing you as you sit here and taking everything that you have" (I thought of the two invaluable crows at the time), "I flatly refuse to give you my boots and shall take whatever den I please."

The stroke was a bold one, and I was glad when I saw that it had succeeded. Gunga Dass changed his tone immediately, and dis-avowed all intention of asking for my boots. At the time it did not strike me as at all strange that I, a Civil Engineer, a man of thirteen years' standing in the Service, and, I trust, an average English-man, should thus calmly threaten murder and violence against the man who had, for a consideration it is true, taken me under his wing. I had left the world, it seemed, for centuries. I was as certain then as I am now of my own existence, that in the accursed settle-ment there was no law save that of the strongest; that the living dead men had thrown behind them every cannon of the world which had cast them out; and that I had to depend for my own life on my strength and vigilance alone. The crew of the ill-fated *Mignonette* are the only men who would understand my frame of mind. "At present," I argued to myself, "I am strong and a match for six of these wretches. It is imperatively necessary that I should, for my own sake, keep both health and strength until the hour of my release comes—if it ever does."

Fortified with these resolutions, I ate and drank as much as I could, and made Gunga Dass understand that I intended to be his master, and that the least sign of insubordination on his part would be visited with the only punishment I had it in my power to inflict—sudden and violent death. Shortly after this I went to bed. That is to say, Gunga Dass gave me a double armful of dried bents which I thrust down the mouth of the lair to the right of his, and followed myself, feet foremost; the hole running about nine feet into the sand with a slight downward inclination, and being

neatly shored with timbers. From my den, which faced the river-front, I was able to watch the waters of the Sutlef flowing past under the light of a young moon and compose myself to sleep as best I might.

The horrors of that night I shall never forget. My den was nearly as narrow as a coffin, and the sides had been worn smooth and greasy by the contact of innumerable naked bodies, added to which it smelt abominably. Sleep was altogether out of the question to one in my excited frame of mind. As the night wore on, it seemed that the entire amphitheater was filled with legions of unclean devils that, trooping up from the shoals below, mocked the unfortunates in their lairs.

Personally I am not of an imaginative temperament—very few Engineers are—but on that occasion I was as completely prostrated with nervous terror as any woman. After half an hour or so, however, I was able once more to calmly review my chances of escape. Any exit by the steep sand walls was of course, impracticable. I had been thoroughly convinced of this some time before. It was possible, just possible, that I might in the uncertain moonlight safely run the gauntlet of the rifle shots. The place was so full of terror for me that I was prepared to undergo any risk in leaving it. Imagine my delight, then, when after creeping stealthily to the river-front I found that the infernal boat was not there. My freedom lay before me in the next few steps!

By walking out to the first shallow pool that lay at the foot of the projecting left horn of the horseshoe, I could wade across, turn the flank of the crater, and make my way inland. Without a moment's hesitation I marched briskly past the tussocks where Gunga Dass had snared the crows, and out in the direction of the smooth white sand beyond. My first step from the tufts of dried grass showed me how utterly futile was any hope of escape; for as I put my foot down, I felt an indescribable drawing, sucking motion of the sand below. Another moment and my leg was swallowed up nearly to the knee. In the moonlight the whole surface of the sand seemed to be shaken with devilish delight at my disappointment. I struggled clear, sweating with terror and exertion, back to the tussocks behind me and fell on my face.

My only means of escape from the semicircle was protected with a quicksand!

How long I lay I have not the faintest idea; but I was roused at the last by the malevolent chuckle of Gunga Dass at my ear.

"I would advise you, Protector of the Poor" (the ruffian was speaking English) "to return to your house. It is unhealthy to lie down here. Moreover, when the boat returns you will most certainly be rifled at." He stood over me in the dim light of the dawn, chucking and laughing to himself. Suppressing my first impulse to catch the man by the neck and throw him on to the quicksand, I rose sullenly and followed him to the platform below the burrows.

Suddenly, and futilely as I thought while I spoke, I asked: "Gunga Dass, what is the good of the boat if I can't get out *anyhow*?" I recollect that even in my deepest trouble I had been speculating vaguely on the waste of ammunition in guarding an already well protected foreshore.

Gunga Dass laughed again and made answer: "They have the boat only in daytime. It is for the reason that there is a way. I hope we shall have the pleasure of your company for much longer time. It is a pleasant spot when you have been here some years and eaten roast crow long enough."

I staggered, numbed and helpless, toward the fetid burrow allotted to me, and fell asleep. An hour or so later I was awakened by a piercing scream—the shrill, high-pitched scream of a horse in pain. Those who have once heard that will never forget the sound. I found some little difficulty in scrambling out of the burrow. When I was in the open, I saw Pornic, my poor old Pornic, lying dead on the sandy soil. How they had killed him I cannot guess. Gunga Dass explained that horse was better than crow, and "greatest good of greatest number is political maxim. We are now Republic, Mister Jukes, and you are entitled to a fair share of the beast. If you like, we will pass a vote of thanks. Shall I propose?"

Yes, we were a Republic indeed! A Republic of wild beasts penned at the bottom of a pit, to eat and fight and sleep till we died. I attempted no protest of any kind, but sat down and stared at the hideous sight in front of me. In less time almost than it takes me to write this, Pornic's body was divided, in some unclean way or other; the men and women had dragged the fragments on to the platform and were preparing their morning meal. Gunga Dass cooked mine. The almost irresistible impulse to fly at the sand walls until I was wearied laid hold of me afresh, and I had to struggle against it with all my might. Gunga Dass was offensively jocular till I told him that if he addressed another remark of any kind whatever to me I should strangle him where he sat. This silenced him till silence became insupportable, and I bade him say something.

"You will live here till you die like the other Feringhi," he said coolly, watching me over the fragment of gristle that he was gnawing.

"What other Sahib, you swine? Speak at once, and don't stop to tell me a lie."

"He is over there," answered Gunga Dass, pointing to a burrow-mouth about four doors to the left of my own. "You can see for yourself. He died in the burrows as you will die, and I will die, and as all these men and women and the one child will also die."

"For pity's sake, tell me all you know about him. Who was he? When did he come, and when did he die?"

This appeal was a weak step on my part. Gunga Dass only leered and replied: "I will not—unless you give me something first."

Then I recollected where I was, and struck the man between the eyes, partially stunning him. He stepped down from the platform at once, and cringing and fawning and weeping and attempting to embrace my feet, led me round to the burrow which he had indicated.

"I know nothing whatever about the gentleman. Your God be my witness that I do not. He was as anxious to escape as you were, and he was shot from the boat, though we all did all things to prevent him from attempting. He was shot here." Gunga Dass laid his hand on his lean stomach and bowed to the earth.

"Well, and what then? Go on!"

"And then—and then, Your Honor, we carried him into his house and gave him water, and put wet cloths on the wound, and he laid down in his house and gave up the ghost."

"In how long? In how long?"

"About half an hour, after he received his wound. I call Vishnu to witness," yelled the wretched man, "that I did everything for him. Everything which was possible, that I did!"

He threw himself down on the ground and clasped my ankles. But I had my doubts about Gunga Dass's benevolence, and kicked him off as he lay protesting.

"I believe you robbed him of everything he had. But I can find out in a minute or two. How long was the Sahib here?"

"Nearly a year and a half. I think he must have gone mad. But hear me swear, Protector of the Poor! Won't Your Honor hear me swear that I never touched an article that belonged to him? What is Your Worship going to do?"

I had taken Gunga Dass by the waist and had hauled him on to the platform opposite the deserted burrow. As I did so I thought

of my wretched fellow-prisoner's unspeakable misery among all these horrors for eighteen months, and the final agony of dying like a rat in a hole, with a bullet wound in the stomach. Gunga Dass fancied I was going to kill him and howled pitifully. The rest of the population, in the plethora that follows a full flesh meal, watched us without stirring.

"Go inside, Gunga Dass," said I, "and fetch it out."

I was feeling sick and faint with horror now. Gunga Dass nearly rolled off the platform and howled aloud.

"But I am Brahmin, Sahib—a high-cast Brahmin. By your soul, by your father's soul, do not make me do this thing!"

"Brahmin or no Brahmin, by my soul and my father's soul, in you go!" I said, and seizing him by the shoulders, I crammed his head into the mouth of the burrow, kicked the rest of him in, and, sitting down, covered my face with my hands.

At the end of a few minutes I heard a rustle and a creak; then Gunga Dass in a sobbing, choking whisper speaking to himself; then a soft thud—and I uncovered my eyes.

The dry sand had turned the corpse entrusted to its keeping into a yellow-brown mummy. I told Gunga Dass to stand off while I examined it. The body—clad in an olive-green hunting-suit much stained and worn, with leather pads on the shoulders—was that of a man between thirty and forty above middle height, with light, sandy hair, long moustache, and a rough unkempt beard. The left canine of the upper jaw was missing, and a portion of the lobe of the right ear was gone. On the second finger of the left hand was a ring—a shield-shaped bloodstone set in gold, with a monogram that might have been either "B.K." or "B.L." On the third finger of the right hand was a silver ring in the shape of a coiled cobra, much worn and tarnished. Gunga Dass deposited a handful of trifles he had picked out of the burrow at my feet, and, covering the face of the body with my handkerchief, I turned to examine these. I give the full list in the hope that it may lead to the identification of the unfortunate man:—

1. Bowl of a briarwood pipe, serrated at the edge; much worn and blackened; bound with string at the screw.
2. Two patent-lever keys; wards of both broken.
3. Tortoise-shell-handled penknife, silver or nickel, name-plate, marked with monogram "B.K."
4. Envelope, postmark undecipherable, bearing a Victorian stamp, addressed to "Miss Mon—" (rest illegible)—"ham"—"nt."

5. Imitation crocodile-skin notebook with pencil. First forty-five pages blank; four and a half illegible; fifteen others filled with private memoranda relating chiefly to three persons—a Mrs. L. Singleton, abbreviated several times to "Lot Single," "Mrs. S. May," and "Garmison," referred to in places as "Jerry" or "Jack."

6. Handle of small-sized hunting-knife. Blade snapped short. Buck's horn, diamond-cut, with swivel and ring on the butt; fragment of cotton cord attached.

It must not be supposed that I inventoried all these things on the spot as fully as I have here written them down. The notebook first attracted my attention, and I put it in my pocket with a view to studying it later on. The rest of the articles I conveyed to my burrow for safety's sake, and there, being a methodical man, I inventoried them. I then returned to the corpse and ordered Gunga Dass to help me to carry it out to the river-front. While we were engaged in this, the exploded shell of an old brown cartridge dropped out of one of the pockets and rolled at my feet. Gunga Dass had not seen it; and I fell to thinking that a man does not carry exploded cartridge-cases, especially 'browns,' which will not bear loading twice, about with him when shooting. In other words, that cartridge-case had been fired inside the crater. Consequently there must be a gun somewhere. I was on the verge of asking Gunga Dass, but checked myself, knowing that he would lie. We laid the body down on the edge of the quicksand by the tussocks. It was my intention to push it out and let it be swallowed up—the only possible mode of burial that I could think of. I ordered Gunga Dass to go away.

Then I gingerly put the corpse out on the quicksand. In doing so, it was lying face downward, I tore the frail and rotten khaki shooting-coat, being intact had been drawn over the body after death, which must have been instantaneous. The secret of the poor wretch's death was plain to me in a flash. Some one of the crater, presumably Gunga Dass, must have shot him with his own gun—the gun that fitted the brown cartridges. He had never attempted to escape in the face of the rifle-fire from the boat.

I pushed the corpse out hastily, and saw it sink from sight literally in a few seconds. I shuddered as I watched. In a dazed, half-conscious way I turned to peruse the notebook. A stained and discoloured slip of paper had been inserted between the binding and the back, and dropped out as I opened the pagaes. This is what it contained: *"Four out from crow-clump; three left; nine out;*

two right; three back; two left; fourteen out; two left; seven out; one left; nine back; two right; six back; four right; seven back." The paper has been burnt and charred at the edges. What it meant I could not understand. I sat down on the dried bents turning it over and over between my fingers, until I was aware of Gunga Dass standing immediately behind me with glowing eyes and outstretched hands.

"Have you got it?" he panted. "Will you not let me look at it also? I swear that I will return it."

"Got what? Return what?" I asked.

"That which you have in your hands. It will help us both." He stretched out his long, bird like talons, trembling with eagerness.

"I could never find it," he continued. "He had secreted it about his person. Therefore I shot him, but nevertheless I was unable to obtain it."

Gunga Dass had quite forgotten his little fiction about the rifle-bullet. I heard him calmly. Morality is blunted by consorting with the Dead who are alive.

"What on earth are you raving about? What is it you want me to give you?"

"The piece of paper in the notebook. It will help us both. Oh, you fool! You fool! Can you not see what it will do for us? We shall escape!"

His voice rose almost to a scream, and he danced with excitement before me. I own I was moved at the chance of getting away.

"Do you mean to say that this slip of paper will help us? What does it mean?"

"Read it aloud! Read it aloud! I beg and I pray to you to read it aloud."

I did so. Gunga Dass listened delightedly, and drew an irregular line in the sand with his fingers.

"See now! It was the length of his gun-barrels without the stock. I have those barrels. Four gun-barrels out from the place where I caught crows. Straight out do you mind me? Then three left. Ah! Now well I remember how that man worked it out night after night. Then nine out, and so on. Out is always straight before you across the quicksand to the North. He told me so before I killed him."

"But if you knew all this why didn't you get out before?"

"I did *not* know it. He told me that he was working it out a year and a half ago, and how he was working it out night after

night when the boat had gone away, and he could get out near the quicksand safely. Then he said that we would get away together. But I was afraid that he would leave me behind one night when he had worked it all out, and so I shot him. Besides, it is not advisable that the men who once get in here should escape. Only I and I am a Brahmin."

The hope of escape had brought Gunga Dass's caste back to him. He stood up, walked about and gesticulated violently. Eventually I managed to make him talk soberly, and he told me how this Englishman had spent six months night after night in exploring, inch by inch, the passage across the quicksand; how he had declared it to be simplicity itself up to within about twenty yards of the river bank after turning the flank of the left horn of the horseshoe. This much he had evidently got completely when Gunga Dass shot him with his own gun.

In my frenzy of delight at the possibilities of escape I recollect shaking hands wildly with Gunga Dass, after we had decided that we were to make an attempt to get away that very night. It was weary work waiting throughout the afternoon.

About ten o'clock, as far as I could judge, when the Moon had just risen above the lip of the crater, Gunga Dass made a move for his burrow to bring out the gun-barrels whereby to measure our path. All the other wretched inhabitants had retired to their lairs long ago. The guardian boat drifted down-stream some hours before, and we were utterly alone by the crow-clump. Gunga Dass, while carrying the gun barrels, let slip the piece of paper which was to be our guide. I stooped down hastily to recover it, and as I did so, I was aware that the creature was aiming a violent blow at the back of my head with the gun-barrels. It was too late to turn round. I must have received the blow somewhere on the nape of my neck, for I fell senseless at the edge of the quicksand.

When I recovered consciousness, the Moon was going down, and I was sensible of intolerable pain in the back of my head. Gunga Dass had disappeared and my mouth was full of blood. I lay down again and prayed that I might die without more ado. Then the unreasoning fury which I have before mentioned laid hold upon me, and I staggered inland towards the walls of the crater. It seemed that some one was calling to me in a whisper "Sahib! Sahib! Sahib!" exactly as my bearer used to call me in the mornings. I fancied that I was delirious until a handful of sand fell at my feet. Then I looked up and saw a head peering down into

amphitheater—the head of Dunnoo, my dog-boy, who attended to my collies. As soon as he had attracted my attention, he held up his hand and showed a rope. I motioned staggering to and fro the while, that he should throw it down. It was a couple of leather punkah-ropes knotted together, with a loop at one end. I slipped the loop over my head and under my arms; heard Dunnoo urge something forward; was conscious that I was being dragged, face downward, up the steep sand-slope, and the next instant found myself choked and half-fainting on the sand hills overlooking the crater. Dunnoo, with his face ashy grey in the moonlight, implored me not to stay but to get back to my tent at once.

It seems that he had tracked Pornic's footprints fourteen miles across the sands to the crater; had returned and told my servants, who flatly refused to meddle with any one, white or black, once fallen into the hideous Village of the Dead; whereupon Dunnoo had taken one of my ponies and a couple of punkah ropes, returned to the crater, and hauled me out as I have described.

An Eye for an Eye

by PETER HEYRMAN

And again, when he woke,
it was only a dream. . . .

When I went into the restaurant it was empty. The light-colored terrazo floors shone in the sunlight from wide picture windows. The sunlight was misty. The morning fog hadn't burned off completely. I sat at one of the small glass tables, lit a cigarette, and waited for service. I heard a door swing open, then a girl appeared. She was blond, pretty, and oddly familiar. She had a face that looked sexy now, but in twenty years sexy would give way to maternal. There was something about her lips' gloss that I liked. She smiled, showing rows of small white teeth.

"You're here for . . ."

"Lunch," I said.

"Let me get you a menu."

"I know what I want."

"You do?" Her voice was soft, throaty. She gave me the smile again.

"The open-faced steak sandwich."

"Anything to drink?"

"A bloody mary."

She went back to where she had come from. I puffed the cigarette and watched smoke drift in the limbo of still air. The place smelled new, as if the plaster hadn't quite dried yet. There was more than one odd thing about the place, but I didn't mind.

She came out with the drink, set it next to me, then went to the far side of the room and stood by a door I hadn't noticed



before. I sprinkled extra pepper into the bloody mary, then sipped it. It was thick, nearly pulpy. I took another sip. She came over.

"Is everything all right?"

"Just fine."

"Your lunch will be out in a moment."

"Thank you."

She left, disappearing behind the door. She emerged a few seconds later with a tray in her hand. She held the tray above her head. I saw steam rising off the top of it. She was still smiling with those pretty white teeth. Still holding the tray high, she took the plate from it, and slipped the dish in front of me. A slab of red meat crushed two small slices of white bread. She hovered in front of the table with her tray. Her lips shone.

"There's something about this . . ." I said. She was nodding. I pushed a fork into the meat. It seemed to squirm. I lifted my knife. The steak was wriggling now. I held it down. It was quivering. The thought crossed my mind: Live flesh quivers. The girl's mouth fell open showing a red tongue. I could almost hear her laugh. The flesh moved. Bones punched out from it, then it grew new flesh to cover them. It was a skinless, bleeding creature scampering off the plate. My head ached. I looked up at the girl and heard the laughing. It was a high-pitched cackle stinging my ears.

I wasn't sure what to say. I heard my voice come up with: "I wanted lunch."

"You got it." Her mouth grew larger. It was getting so that was all there was to her. The lips, the teeth, and the laugh spread out across the table in front of me, rocking back and forth on the glass, the huge lips curled into a sneer. The laugh grew louder. The ache in my head turned to sharp, stabbing pain.

It's a nightmare, I told myself, but the pain cut into me, and the mouth rocked across the table on the curled red lip. The laugh shattered the teeth, and they crumbled into a pile of white dust which blew onto the floor. It lay in a heap where she had stood. The laugh ended, but echoes of it slapped the walls. A hand slammed my head into the table. I heard my nose crack. I stared through the glass. The drink had spilled, and red liquid streamed across the table top. I could see the white powder that had been teeth being stained red. The hand on the back of my head kept pushing until I thought my skull would crack.

I screamed.

When I woke it was in darkness. A voice came from behind me. It had a soothing sound.

"It was only a nightmare," my mother said.

My face was wet with sweat.

"It'll be all right," she said.

"Thanks."

I felt her soft hand on my shoulder. Her silky, warm fingers stroked my temples. "It's all right now, isn't it?"

"I'm glad I'm awake," I said. The pain left. Her fingers seemed to pull it from my head.

"It's like when you were young. Remember?"

"I remember."

"And you would have those horrible nightmares, and those headaches, and I would come to your room and massage your temples until the demons went away. You're feeling better now. Aren't you?"

"Better."

"There, now go to sleep." The fingers worked, stroking softly. They'd always been good at that.

When I woke up in the morning it was cloudy. The police were at the door. I let them in, and two men in uniform began to search the house. A man in a dark suit took me into my study and closed the door. I could hear the other two upstairs taking apart my room. The man in the suit sat in my easy chair. I sat down behind my desk. He smiled at me. I smiled back.

"We found the body," he said.

"Where was it?"

"It had washed downstream. You left a pile of clues."

"I suppose I did."

"It wasn't hard. We finally figured the motive."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"I doubt you ever will," he told me.

"I'll make a full confession."

"You already did. It was read in court. It was effective. You convinced everyone in that courtroom that you were guilty. Thanks."

"I don't remember it. I don't remember the motive either."

"You will once you see the corpse."

"When will I see it?"

"It shouldn't be long now."

"I guess you'll be taking me in, right?" I asked.

"We did that already. You can stay here. We aren't worried about you anymore."

"I thought you said I'd see the body."

"You will."

I heard his men clattering down the steps. He got up to leave, and I began to rise.

"No need for you to get up," he said. "I can find my way to the door. We just came by to take a good look at the place, and to let you know everything's been taken care of."

I reached out to shake his hand. He looked at it, then up at me. His face was pale, expressionless. He wouldn't take the hand.

"What am I supposed to do now?" I asked.

"Wait. You don't have a choice. That's all you can do."

"You'd help me if you could, wouldn't you?"

He stared blankly at me.

I went on: "You seem like a decent sort of man, not the kind who'd leave me hanging. You wouldn't do this if the choice was yours, I'm sure of it."

"Are you?" He kept the blank stare on his face.

"Will anything become of me?"

"It already has. The punishment was given. Now you'll take it."

"What was the punishment?"

"It'll come to you."

He turned on his heel, then walked from the room. He closed the oak door behind him. I heard the muffled sounds of talking, then footsteps, then the front door shutting. I went to the window, but outside there was only thick, darkening mist. I tried the door. It was locked. I struggled with it, but it was no use. The lock was fused, and would never break. I went back to the window. I threw it open, but the mist hit me. It was thick, putrid stuff. I coughed violently, then slammed the window shut. I stumbled back to my chair. Above me something was dragged across the floor. The house was moving.

I heard thuds and more dragging. It sounded as if plaster wall was slapping against plaster wall. The walls of the study began moving. Inward. Slowly, as if they were carefully considering each tiny motion, the walls inched across the floor. The two walls came as if on tiny rollers. The other two walls stayed put. I ran back to the window. When I opened it the soupy air boiled. My face

began to burn. My fingers were singed. I threw the window down. The walls kept coming, and coming. Soon they had me pinned. Still they came. I tried to move, but couldn't. The first rib cracked, then the second. My mouth opened. My throat let out a shriek.

I woke in a cold sweat, and still lay in darkness.

"Another nightmare," my mother said. I felt a towel wipe the perspiration from my face. "Have you been having headaches again?"

"Bad ones."

"What did you do this time?"

"Not a damn thing."

"Don't curse." Her fingers rubbed my temples. "Does that feel better?"

"Yes."

"Just relax. Everything will be fine. No matter what anyone might say everything will work out. The pain will go away. I'll make it go away."

"Thank you."

"You're sure you didn't do anything this time?"

"Not sure."

"Don't trouble yourself over it. Go to sleep."

The fingers stroked until I could barely feel them. They were more gnarled, and drier now, but she still had the moves. A voice inside me begged: No dreams, no dreams.

In the morning I got up and went to work. I opened the glass door of the building and walked to the elevator. The old white-haired operator pushed the button for my floor. I was the only passenger. He let me off in a long corridor. I headed for the office and passed the reception pool. The girls were drinking coffee while they gossiped about something. They watched me from the corners of their eyes. They whispered. I didn't care.

I got to my cubicle and sat down behind my desk. I started reading through the paperwork. It all seemed vague, and I found mistake after mistake in grammar and spelling. I wanted to check on some words, but I glanced around the desk and couldn't find the dictionary. I started to get up.

A hand grabbed my hair from behind, jerking me back into my seat. A voice said: "Where do you think you're going?"

"To get the dictionary."

"Not much need for that now." The voice was low. It had a hard, sharp edge to it.

The fingers gripped my hair. They began to pull. I could feel the roots giving way from my scalp. My head felt as if it was covered with liquid. I wondered if it was blood. I wanted to scream, but my vocal chords were cut off. It was as if a rope was drawn around my neck. I could barely breathe. Something was crushing my lungs.

"Feel good?" the voice said. The fingers tugged harder. Another thousand hairs ripped from my skull. My hands grasped the arms of my chair. I felt leather cords tying my wrists to the arms. My ankles were tethered to the chair's base. All I could do was stare straight ahead.

"You know what we're here for."

I couldn't answer. The last few thousand hairs were torn from my scalp. I heard the whirring of a machine. Something cold touched my bald head.

"Turn it on."

The shock waves started. My flesh cooked. My blood began to boil. I tried to open my mouth, but it wasn't there.

"One more nightmare," my mother said. The fingers touched my temples. There was no flesh on them now. They were only skeletal digits reaching through the darkness. They creaked like bones.

"When will they stop?" I asked.

"They won't."

"Not ever?"

"Not ever. But I'll be here to soothe you." She laid a musty rag across my face. It smelled of dying leaves, and felt crumbly as if it were decomposing. With her bone fingers scraping across my temples I breathed in the stench of it. I wondered if it might be a rag from the clothing she'd had on when I dumped her in the stream. Her fingers dug into my temples. There wasn't any point in telling her about the pain. She wouldn't care anymore.

The Boarded Window

by AMBROSE BIERCE

He knew enough about dead people
to know they needed burying. . . .
But he didn't have the heart
to bury his wife.

In 1830, only a few miles away from what is now the great city of Cincinnati, lay an immense and almost unbroken forest. The whole region was sparsely settled by people of the frontier—restless souls who no sooner had hewn fairly habitable homes out of the wilderness and attained to that degree of prosperity which today we should call indigence, than, impelled by some mysterious impulse of their nature, they abandoned all and pushed farther westward, to encounter new perils and privations in the effort to regain the meagre comforts which they had voluntarily renounced. Many of them had already forsaken that region for the remoter settlements, but among those remaining was one who had been of those first arriving. He lived alone in a house of logs surrounded on all sides by the great forest, of whose gloom and silence he seemed a part, for no one had ever known him to smile nor speak a needless word. His simple wants were supplied by the sale or barter of skins of wild animals in the river town, for not a thing did he grow upon the land which, if needful, he might have claimed by right of undisturbed possession. There were evidences of "improvement"—a few acres of ground immediately about the house had once been cleared of its trees, the decayed stumps of which were half concealed by the new growth that had been

suffered to repair the ravage wrought by the axe. Apparently the man's zeal for agriculture had burned with a failing flame, expiring in penitential ashes.

The little log house, with its chimney of sticks, its roof of warping clapboards weighted with traversing poles and its "chinking" of clay, had a single door and, directly opposite, a window. The latter, however, was boarded up—nobody could remember a time when it was not. And none knew why it was so closed; certainly not because of the occupant's dislike of light and air, for on those rare occasions when a hunter had passed that lonely spot the recluse had commonly been seen sunning himself on his doorstep if heaven had provided sunshine for his need. I fancy there are a few persons living today who ever knew the secret of that window, but I am one, as you shall see.

The man's name was said to be Murlock. He was apparently seventy years old, actually about fifty. Something besides years had had a hand in his aging. His hair and long, full beard were white, his grey, lustreless eyes sunken, his face singularly seamed with wrinkles which appeared to belong to two intersecting systems. In figure he was tall and spare, with a stoop of the shoulders—a burden bearer. I never saw him; these particulars I learned from my grandfather, from whom also I got the man's story when I was a lad. He had known him when living nearby in that early day.

One day Murlock was found in his cabin, dead. It was not a time and place for coroners and newspapers, and I suppose it was agreed that he had died from natural causes or I should have been told, and should remember. I know only that with what was probably a sense of the fitness of things the body was buried near the cabin, alongside the grave of his wife, who had preceded by so many years that local tradition had retained hardly a hint of her existence. That closes the final chapter of this true story—excepting, indeed, the circumstance that many years afterward, in company with an equally intrepid spirit, I penetrated to the place and ventured near enough to the ruined cabin to throw a stone against it, and ran away to avoid the ghost which every well-informed boy thereabout knew haunted the spot. But there is an earlier chapter—that supplied by my grandfather.

When Murlock built his cabin and began laying sturdily about with his axe to hew out a farm—the rifle, meanwhile, his means of support—he was young, strong, and full of hope. In that Eastern country whence he came he had married, as was the fashion, a

young woman in all ways worthy of his honest devotion, who shared the dangers and privations of his lot with a willing spirit and light heart. There is no known record of her name; of her charms of mind and person tradition is silent and the doubter is at liberty to entertain his doubt; but God forbid that I should share it! Of their affection and happiness there is abundant assurance in every added day of the man's widowed life; for what but the magnetism of a blessed memory could have chained that venturesome spirit to a lot like that?

One day Murlock returned from gunning in a distant part of the forest to find his wife prostrate with fever, and delirious. There was no physician within miles, no neighbor, nor was she in a condition to be left, to summon help. So he set about the task of nursing her back to health, but at the end of the third day she fell into unconsciousness and so passed away, apparently, with never a gleam of returning reason.

From what we know of a nature like his we may venture to sketch in some of the details of the outline picture drawn by my grandfather. When convinced that she was dead, Murlock had sense enough to remember that the dead must be prepared for burial. In performance of this sacred duty he blundered now and again, did certain things incorrectly, and others which he did correctly were done over and over. His occasional failures to accomplish some simple and ordinary act filled him with astonishment, like that of a drunken man who wonders at the suspension of familiar natural laws. He was surprised and a little ashamed; surely it is unkind not to weep for the dead. "Tomorrow," he said aloud, "I shall have to make the coffin and dig the grave; and then I shall miss her, when she is no longer in sight; but now—she is dead, of course, but it is all right—it *must* be all right, somehow. Things cannot be so bad as they seem."

He stood over the body in the fading light, adjusting the hair and putting the finishing touches to the simple toilet, doing all mechanically, with soulless care. And still through his consciousness ran an undersense of conviction that all was right—that he should have her again as before, and everything explained. He had had no experience in grief; his capacity had not been enlarged by use. His heart could not contain it all, nor his imagination rightly conceive it. He did not know he was so hard stuck; *that* knowledge would come later, and never go. Grief is an artist of powers as various as the instruments upon which he plays his dirges for the

dead, evoking from some the sharpest, shrillest notes, from others the low, grave chords that throb recurrent like the slow beating of a distant drum. Some natures it startles; some it stupefies. To one it comes like the stroke of an arrow, stinging all the sensibilities to a keener life; to another as the blow of a bludgeon, which in crushing benumbs. We may conceive Murlock to have been that way affected, for (and here we are upon surer ground than that of conjecture) no sooner had he finished his pious work than, sinking into a chair by the side of the table upon which the body lay, and noting how white the profile showed in the deepening gloom, he laid his arms upon the table's edge, and dropped his face into them, tearless yet and unutterably weary. At that moment came in through the open window a long wailing sound like the cry of a lost child in the far deeps of the darkening wood! But the man did not move. Again, and nearer than before, sounded that unearthly cry upon his failing sense. Perhaps it was a wild beast; perhaps it was a dream. For Murlock was asleep.

Some hours later, as it afterward appeared, this unfaithful watcher awoke and, lifting his head from his arms, intently listened—he knew not why. There in the black darkness by the side of the dead, recalling all without a shock, he strained his eyes to see—he knew not what. His senses were all alert, his breath was suspended, his blood had stilled its tides as if to assist the silence. Who—what had waked him, and where was it?

Suddenly the table shook beneath his arms, and at the same moment he heard, or fancied that he heard, a light, soft step—another—sounds as of bare feet upon the floor!

He was terrified beyond the power to cry out or move. Perforce he waited—waited there in the darkness through seeming centuries of such dread as one may know, yet live to tell. He tried vainly to speak the dead woman's name, vainly to stretch forth his hand across the table to learn if she were there. His throat was powerless, his arms and hands were like lead. Then occurred something most frightful. Some heavy body seemed hurled against the table with an impetus that pushed it against his breast so sharply as nearly to overthrow him, and at the same instant he heard and felt the fall of something upon the floor with so violent a thump that the whole house was shaken by the impact. A scuffling ensued, and a confusion of sounds impossible to describe. Murlock had risen to his feet. Fear had by excess forfeited control of his faculties. He flung his hands upon the table. Nothing was there!

There is a point at which terror may turn to madness; and madness incites to action. With no definite intent, from no motive but the wayward impulse of a madman, Murlock sprang to the wall, with a little groping seized his loaded rifle, and without aim discharged it. By the flash which lit up the room with a vivid illumination, he saw an enormous panther dragging the dead woman toward the window, its teeth fixed in her throat! Then there were darkness blacker than before, and silence; and when he returned to consciousness the sun was high and the wood vocal with songs of birds.

The body lay near the window, where the beast had left it when frightened away by the flash and report of the rifle. The clothing was deranged, the long hair in disorder, the limbs lay anyhow. From the throat, dreadfully lacerated, had issued a pool of blood not yet entirely coagulated. The ribbon with which he had bound the wrists was broken; the hands were tightly clenched. Between the teeth was a fragment of the animal's ear.

Dear D.B. . . .

by A.R. MORLAN

It was one of those days that left her feeling like she didn't know *exactly* who she was. The trouble was, no one else seemed to, either.

At first, I only thought that good old Super-super goofed, *again*. After all, the man's command of the "Engleesh as she is spoken" isn't the best to begin with (but you would think that living in the City for umpteen years would make a difference—sometimes I'm sure that English is doomed to become the United States' second language), but even *he* should know the difference between *gringa* and *gringo* (at least that's how I think the "Spanish she is spoken"—I never did take that course back in Ewerton High)—but at the time I decided that it would *not* do to gripe about it. He does allow me to keep Wolfie and Duke (neither of whom will *ever* be mistaken for lap dogs) up here in the apartment, which is not the most common practice here in New York City. (And if I'm not a good girl, he'll confiscate his Roach Motels!)

Anyhow, Roach Motels and the boys aside, when Mr. Hernandez said what he did to me, I had just gotten back my proofs for "The Mouth That Would Not Die" from *Bloodbath Quarterly*. The editor scribbled that the "... That Wouldn't Die" sounded a bit "flip." As in *Wilson*, I was tempted to scribble back in the margins, but you learn to keep such thoughts to yourself—especially when there's a five foot high slush pile generated by writers just dying to get a shot at *BQ*. (Instead, I told myself I'd change it back when the anthology of my work came out.) As usual, the galleys came back with the standard note, "Running late,

get back ASAP," and so on. I had only found three typos, all minor, when Mr. Hernandez knocked, asking for the rent, and for once he *didn't* make some crack about (pick one or more): my halter top, my shorts, my body, and/or my single female status. (Thank goodness for two mammoth *male* doggies at a time like that! And I used to think good ole Dead Fred Ferger back home in Wisconsin was bad! Spare me from the Latin lover type!)

Instead of his usual "How's de preety señorita?" line, Mr. H. kept it short, but right before he left, he bent down to itch Wolfie's head and said something about, "You boys protect the young *gringo*, okay?" but I didn't really *think* about it until after I took a second look at the proof sheets (noticing the initials of the guy who typeset my story in the upper left hand corner of the first page—he was the one that the editor at *Gore Magazine* wrote to me about; she said that he really liked "that D.B. Winston's stuff," if I remembered her letter correctly), and even then, I figured that Mr. H. made a simple mistake . . . but after I went to the drugstore, what Mr. Hernandez said began to niggle at the back of my mind.

Not that the trip to the drugstore and back was eventful—but, in a way, that *was* the problem. All I had picked up was a box of tampons, some cheap typing paper (is there any other kind?) and a few stamps from one of those mini mail-box shaped dispensers (the kind that gobbles your quarters and usually forgets to stick out a tongue of stamps), and even though a few of the toughs from the neighborhood were lounging around the counter and by the door for once they didn't give me a hard time. Once, one of them offered to help me "put in" a feminine product (shades of Dead Fred and his "can I trim your bush?" remarks), but this time they just stood around gassing, playing with the dials on their boom boxes (which I swear grow out of their shoulder blades) and scaring the bejesus out of out-of-towners who happen to find themselves in this part of the city (*not* your highlight tourist attraction here!). And I actually made it *back* to the apartment house unaccosted . . . and I didn't have the boys along for moral support, either. (When I walk the dogs, *no one* approaches me—if the *boys* don't scare them off, there's always the option of beaming someone over the head with the pooper scooper!)

But *that* day, I only figured I'd lucked out. It wasn't until I called the super to come and take a look at my leaking faucet (the roaches were taking sides for swimming teams in my sink) a week later that I realized something was *wrong*, really off-kilter. For

one thing, Mr. H.—who usually broke both legs running to come spend time with the *gringa*—made some excuse about not being able to make it until after supper. I figured that perhaps he didn't realize it was *me*, the "Preeety señorita," so I said who was calling, taking pains to pronounce my name *very* plainly, and after I did, there was this *pause* on his end of the line, and I could hear this Spanish-language radio or TV station in the background (like something out of *The Possession of Joel Delaney*, the part when Shirley MacLaine goes slumming in search of help for her brother) and only after I'd shouted "*Hello?*" into the speaker a few times he came back on the line, muttering that he'd be up right away, but before I hung up I heard him grumble something about the "*loco gringo*." At the time, I thought to myself, *Maybe you should write "I Am Woman" across the front of your tee*, since it *did* seem funny . . . then. As it was, Mr. H's visit was uneventful; he growled that he had his food waiting on the hotplate, and hurriedly fixed the faucet, but as he was leaving (and Mr. "Do Not Disturb—Night Job Sleeping" Door Sign—as if a "Night Job" was an entity that needed sleep!—was just leaving *his* apartment across the hall), Hernandez happened to say to himself, "Goddamn *loco gringo* son-sabitch," which prompted Mr. "Night Job Sleeping" to chortle "Goo'night, fellah" at me. I almost sicced Wolfie and Duke on him, but figured, why waste the effort? They might have gotten food poisoning from the jerk. I decided to get them to bark at his door some *day* . . . his sign didn't say "*No Barking*!"

However, I didn't get a chance to mull over the day's events, since the BQ editor called; would I consider some last-minute editing on "The Mouth That . . ."? Nothing major, just a few changes near the end? After scrambling around for a copy of the MS (not much of a scramble, considering the size of my Roach-Motel room) I dictated the changes over the phone, and at that point things *really* began to get weird, for between lines, he kept asking "Got a cold, D.B.?" "Can you speak up?" "Bad connection," and I wouldn't have paid any undue attention to that if I'd still been living in Ewerton, where bad connections were the norm—but he was calling from an office only a couple of miles away at the most! After he hung up I told myself I'd have to get Super-super to come and look at it (since Ma Bell was slaughtered, calling the phone people is a fool's errand!)—when he got himself some glasses, or after I made up my "I Am Woman" shirt.

And that was when things were still fairly *normal*.

Two weeks later I got my check for "The Mouth That . . ." and went to the bank to try and cash it. I hadn't been in for about a month, but that isn't an *eternity* . . . yet the teller, a woman who I *thought* would recognize me (I'd been to her a few times before, during other visits) acted like I'd caught the first ship from Mars and landed on the roof of the building five minutes before, and jumped down to the lobby through the ceiling. Now I'm not a naive person, even though I was born and raised in a small town. I'm aware of the fact that New Yorkers simply don't have the *time* to be slavishly polite to every Tom, Dick, and Henrietta who walks through the door (unless they work at Bloomies and are busy trying to get you to submit to a cosmetic makeover—*then* they act like they'll sell you the city for a string of beads and some feathers!) but I was expecting a teller at *my* bank to treat me like a *human being*.

The woman gave me a strange look when I submitted my check and passbook (for deposit of part of the check; I'm not crazy enough to spend the whole thing at a pop), looking from the book to me and back again, like something wasn't computing for her. She began to act as if I'd just handed her a scribbled note topped with the words "This is a Stickup!" and stammered something about needing some "recent identification," and I reached over took my things, and said for her to forget it, and left, while she stared at me as if I was Al Pacino carrying a long flower box under one arm. While I walked to the subway station, I began to think about the past few days and decided that the Big Apple (as the folks back home love to call it when I phone them—in the background I can hear Mom yell "Arlin, c'mere, it's our girl calling from the Big Apple!") had gone wormy for me. I mean, Ewerton was *bad*—it was deeply entrenched in that old system of "Oh, you're Arlin Winston's girl," or "Her? She's old Palmer Winston's grandchild," or worse, "Devorah? That's old man Winston's son's little girlie." When I got my driver's license, I had almost expected it to say "Devorah Bambi Winston, daughter of Arlin, son of Palmer, grandson of Porter," or something semi-Biblical like that. It was so *frustrating*; if I had stayed back home, I wouldn't have ever had a chance to be *me*, but I would have either been dubbed "So and so's *child*," or "the such-and-such *girl*," or—if I had married one of the local-yokel Ewerton males, eventually I would have become "Joe Blow's *wife*," or "the mother of Dick and Jane," and so on to infinity. Part of the reason why I cleared out of there was the fact that I had had

no hope of carving out an identity for myself; in a small town a person is never a *person*, period, but either the offspring of someone or the parent of another . . . at least in New York, I figured that a person would be known only as his or her *self*, without a centipede like trail of relatives hanging behind them. All I wanted to be was *me*, D.B. Winston, writer, but after all this *gringo* and "better identification" stuff, I was beginning to wonder if I should go and have my gender and vital statistics tattooed across my forehead!

Crawling out of my pool of self-pity long enough to look up for my station number, I noticed that I was sitting in a subway car full of boom-box babes, all big, all poorly dressed . . . and *all leaving me alone*. And there wasn't a Guardian Angel in sight.

When I reached my stop, I hurried off, hoping to leave before my traveling companions came to their senses. During the walk home, I toyed with the idea of working this all into a story. It had worked for me in the past . . . as evidenced by my still uncashed check.

After a bit of arm-twisting I got the super to cash my check for me (I used an automatic teller to make my deposit later on), and settled down with a new stock of groceries (and seeming *tons* of Alpo!), trying to catch up on my writing. Just for the hell of it, I began a story called "The Metamorphosis." While I was busy writing that, the BQ editor sent me a black and white photo mock-up of the cover for the next issue—a real stunner. I'd had my name on the cover of more than a few issues, but this time was the first time that a cover *illo* had been based on *my* story. I liked the way Potter put the reflection (distorted, of course) of the killer on the old-man's spittle-moist teeth, inside the cavern of that drooling, vacant mouth. And next to that: A HAIR-RAISING TALE OF NEIGHBORLY REVENGE THE MOUTH THAT WOULD NOT DIE! BY D.B. WINSTON. As I looked it over, I realized why the editor had opted for the title change; this way it was a bit more on the Lovecraftian side. If only my Grandpa Winston (the former English Lit teacher) could have seen that! (I wondered if *Gramps* would have had trouble with my gender, too . . .) But the story beckoned a sure five hundred dollars if I could get it done and accepted at a prozine, so I put the cover mock-up aside and got down to business, thinking that the heroine/hero of the story was the only with with big problems. . . .

By the seventh of June, I realized that I *had* it with crazy New

Yorkers. Never mind the *gringo* bit of the month before, or Mr. "Night Job Sleeping"'s jibes (I'd give him something to go banging his walls and bellowing about!), or even the snafu at the bank—just who would have thought that the sort of thing would happen at *Bloomies*? (Saks, *maybe*, but good old *Bloomies*? My God, they let Paul Mazursky make that *movie* there! If Robin Williams could *defect* there, I thought they'd be good sports about almost *anything*!)

Hold on, try to calm down. I must try to figure out what went on, where it all went wrong. (Put it down, good old black and white.) But thinking about it, even after everything *else* which has happened, still makes me shake . . . it didn't *seem* like the end of the world, not *then*. But it was *close*.

Anyhow—I went there to buy myself a new half-slip, some panties, and maybe a nightgown if the pennies stretched far enough. So. Once through the door, I made my way past the endless cosmetic counters, mildly surprized that the floorwalkers didn't rush up to me, begging me to let them spritz me with some much-too-expensive perfume, hoping I'd find it irresistible and buy five gallons of the slop, or just spray me and ask *later* for permission. Usually, by the time I'd made it to the second floor I'd end up smelling like a cheap streetwalker on Friday night, but that day I lucked out and escaped the scented hordes. It really seemed like my day, no Loreleilike calls from the cosmetic clerks, begging me to wander over for a makeover, and I rode the crowded escalators until I found the intimate apparel. I was happily looking over the unmentionables, no stuffing things into my jeans pockets, no hiding panties in a false-bottom bag, simply minding my own biz-niz . . . when the saleslady came up, hovering like a polycotton hummingbird. With too much eyeshadow. She began to pester me, asking if I was looking for "something for a special someone?" Not understanding why she couldn't go bother one of the dozens of other shoppers milling around us, I said, "No thanks, just browsing until I find something I like." I held a pair of panties up to the light, trying to see how sheer they were, when she tried another line of questioning:

"Did you happen to have someone special in mind? Maybe that would aid in your selection—"

Thinking *read my lips, honey*, I tossed over my shoulder, "Just looking for something for myself . . . if you don't mind. Thanks for asking." She didn't leave. I could smell her, and feel her

breathing down my neck. Turning around, I saw her give me a look, like I had feathers growing out of my ears, or a less appropriate part of my anatomy, then exit Ms. Too Much Eyeshadow. Followed shortly by *my* exit. I figured that she'd have to take a coffee break sometime; I'd check out the undies then. Walking away, I remembered that the World Fantasy Con would be coming up soon, and decided to check out the junior dresses.

Bad move. And no warning signs this time; the salesclerk initially left me alone, in peace, while I looked over the racks of new fall arrivals and she didn't even flinch when I picked out two reasonably priced streetlength dresses (one with a side slit, the other a sweater-dress) and approached the counter. Then—

Her: "Yes, will that be cash, charge or—"

Me: "Oh, no, not yet . . . could I please try them on? I have two items here—"

Her: (look of utter "slap-me-silly" shock on her face) "Uhhh—"

Me: (getting *mucho* disturbed) "Okay, I'll leave one here and take them in one at a time, if that's the prob—"

Her: "I'm sorry, sir, but you don't understand, this isn't *that* kind of store—"

Me: (completely disturbed now) "Sir? Are you *blind*, ma'am? All I want to do is try on these dresses—"

Her: "I—I—I'm afraid that *you* can't do that, at least not *here*—"

Me: (something *beyond* disturbed) "Miss, is there a *problem*? Is there a limit on the number of dresses I can take in there? Are you afraid I'll shoplift these? You are welcome to come in the dressing room *with* me if that's what's got you worried—"

Her: (barely stifled scream, by now we have an *audience*) "Please-leave-this-store-immediately! Be-fore I have to call the manager." All of the above with a plastered-on *smile*, for cryin' out loud! Thinking that I would have caused less of a disturbance if I'd put my head under her skirt like Robin Williams did to Maria Conchita Alonso in that damned *film*, I threw the dresses on the floor—by now people were openly staring, then shoved their noses in Fabric Care tags when I stomped past—and started doing a number on my Bloomies Charge card with my nail clippers while riding the escalators to the ground floor. I hope all the little pieces jammed up the mechanism, too.

During my ride home—my unmolested, unpinched ride home—I wondered if New York was going through a gender-blindness epidemic of some sort.

Not long after the Bloomies fiasco, my contributor's copies arrived, along with a little note from the *BQ* editor, which was to let me know that in this year's *BQ* Reader's Poll I'd placed as the fifth most requested author, up six places from last year, et cetera, et cetera. There was more, but at the time I wasn't in the mood to read on. I mean, I figured he didn't *know* what was happening to me. And I wasn't about to call him up and announce, "Hey, by the way, the *funniest* thing happened at Bloomies last week, even better than that scene in *Moscow on the Hudson* where Robin Williams puts his head under the sales clerk's skirt. Only they wouldn't even let me try on a skirt, let alone—"

He probably would have attributed it to my fertile mind, my writer's flair for the dramatic . . . but even Larry Olivier couldn't top *this* situation's dramatics. And no one could be *this* imaginative.

The dogs, my *boys*, my trusty Wolfie and Duke, began looking at me strangely. And they sniffed me more, the wary type of snuffle with no wagging tail they used to reserve for good ole Dead Fred the help-ful back home neighbor (bless his nose-ey soul!) and now for Mr. H. when he comes down for the rent. It couldn't *be*, not *really* but the dogs were acting as if I smelled like an old *man*.

By the next day, I realized that something was *bad* wrong. When I picked up the phone on the second ring, the *BQ* editor asked *me* if I was home! I didn't know if he bought my line about a bad connection, but I kept crinkling the wrapper from the boys' Gaines Burgers (even Lorne Green would gag on Alpo day after day) next to the receiver, so I think that maybe I fooled him—and doing something like that to him made me feel like week-old fishbowl scum. The call was about the novella he'd bought some time ago—would I mind if he split it into three parts, and ran it in three issues? I was so rattled by then I almost made the suggestion that I'd be happy if he ran it a line at a time until kingdom come, but then reason shut my mouth for me, warning, *why blame this mess on your editor?* So far he hadn't called me "Sir" or *gringol*! However, once he hung up, I dug out my old cassette recorder from under the bed and taped my voice, then played it back. It sounded fine—and feminine—to me, but it made the boys howl . . . and the sound of Mr. "Night Job Sleeping" banging on the wall was sweet music to me, but by the following day *nothing* could have made me smile.

That day, what went on went beyond *wrong*, bypassed *strange* and entered *bizarre* at full tilt. And all I did was go down the hall to the *bathroom*, something I've done hundreds of times since moving to the city, to this apartment-cum-tenement. And while I wasn't actually *friends* (or even very friendly) with the people on my floor, things were non-hostile enough to allow for a bit of overlapping when it came to using bathroom stalls; after all, total strangers use the same restroom at the same time in all sorts of public places with no hassle. At least I knew the other tenants by sight and occasionally by name (from matching bodies with name plates on mail slots), and they likewise "knew" me. Or so I had assumed. And I thought that Mrs. Pendelton (Miss? Ms? All I knew was that she always took the Social Security checks out of the box labeled "Pendelton, S.") was one of the friendlier souls on my floor, at least she'd grunt "Lo" as she passed by a person in the hallway, hunched over her walker. Even the boom-box babes on the corner didn't bother her. But that day you could have heard her clear into the Bronx, the way she carried on when she lurched out of the stall and found me at the sink washing my hands. Goggling at me from behind her trifocals, chins quivering, papery white lips working in indignation, and then yelling: "Ain't you got no decency? Getcha kicks outta *listening*? *Pre-vert*! Raised in a *baaarn*? No sense of *shame*, young man? Terrible, just *terrible*! Listenin' in on old ladies! Pig!" And she tread on my instep with her walker as she passed me for good measure. (And it hurt like nobody's business! She came on like some sort of Hell's Grandma!)

I thought I could hear Mr. "Night Job Sleeping" laughing at me all the way from the bathroom to my room. When I got in, locked the door and sank on to a kitchen chair, the boys wouldn't even lick my hands.

No doubt they thought I was a "*pre-vert*" too.

Venturing out only when nature's call couldn't be ignored, I worked in isolation on the rest of "The Metamorphosis," and on a whim I decided to try sending it in to that holy-of-literary-holies, *Skin Magazine*. The one the 7-Elevens wouldn't touch with two flag poles soldered together. I figured it wouldn't hurt; one of the assistant editors there knew my work from previous tries, and once I got a handwritten note scribbled on the bottom of a rejection slip, telling me to please try again, that the editor of the magazine knew my work from *Bloodbath* and liked it. They got my name wrong on

the note, calling me "Dear Mr. Winston." The note *was* a nice touch, and since I'd be appearing in the next three issues of *BQ* anyhow, I decided to give *Skin* a shot at "The Metamorphosis."

If I had any hopes of pulling stakes out of this dump (the nerve of that old biddy!) I had to start pulling in contracts from the top markets . . . a lot of them.

In retrospect, sending in that story to *Skin Magazine* was the best thing I ever did—considering the circumstances I had fallen into—but at the time, when I finally got it through my hick skull what was going on, I didn't *want* to believe it . . .

After a month of slinking to the bathroom, avoiding Mr. Hernandez and his mumbled *gringo* remarks by sliding the rent under his door before it was due, and telling myself that it was *normal* for a woman *not* to hear lewd comments from men on the street (despite the fact that I still wore skimpy summer garb), I got a call—not from *Bloodbath*, but from *Skin Magazine* . . . and not just from someone in the fiction department. I was speaking to Mr. Father-of-Skin-himself, the Man Mr.-Meese-Would-Love-to-Bring-to-His-Knees, the *editor*. *Him*, his *Skinness*, talking to *me*. The clods back in Ewerton would have done number two in their sanctimonious overalls while tsk-tsking in horror (the few stores in Ewerton which reluctantly stock *Bloodbath Quarterly* only do so for a week before ripping off the covers and tossing the pages in the dumpsters, ever since that braless she-demon graced the Fall cover a couple of years back—welcome to the Bible Belt, folks!) while the hometown girl passed the time of day with Mr. Pornography, Esq. Actually, the guy seemed very nice, not sexist at all.

Very politely, he asked for "Denton Blair" (my pen name—if my mom's egg had got it on with a Y sperm instead of an X way back *when*, it would have been my real name), then corrected himself when he noticed my real name—D.B. Winston—typed at the top of the page, next to the "Member, SFWA." (I suppose days spend oogling bare, tanned flesh can mess up a guy's eyesight.) Either way, he wasn't surprised that I was a woman (while we chatted, I thought *how nice, a man who prints beaver shots who isn't a macho "where's your husband, little woman" boor . . .*), then he got to the point; he wanted to run "The Metamorphosis" in the January issue, and my heart almost pounded right through my chest and popped out of my t-shirt (John Hurt with his Alien-in-the-chest would have had nothing on *me*), and I had to keep reminding myself, *don't grovel, woman! Don't drool on the receiver and*

electrocute yourself! Suppose he wants some revisions!

As I mentally congratulated myself for making a sale to *Skin* without an agent (*mine, mine, the money will be all miiiine!*) I had to do a double-take when the editor said, "You had me going there, D.B., the part in the story where the protagonist is still a woman is *fantastic*—I do know my women, and I almost believed for a minute there that you *are* a woman! Believe me, man, that is no mean feat, fooling an old 'letch' like me! By the way, I've been following your *Bloodbath* work, and I wish we'd have grabbed some of your stuff sooner—you're right up there, fellah. Not a King or Barker yet, but someday, right? One more thing, do you still want to run this under the Denton Balir name or—okay, I'll change it right now. Well, nice talking to you, D.B., and thanks for thinking of us . . ." and so on, and when he finally got off the line I threw down the receiver and began to paw through my files (some system—an old cardboard box from Keebler cookies I keep under my bed . . . I don't think Stephen King ever did it *this* way), looking for all my correspondence, rejection slips, contracts, and whatnot.

After culling what I wanted, I spread the mass of papers out on the floor (the dogs were stretched out against the walls, rumbling at me, heads on paws, eyes half-lidded), and began looking them over carefully, pausing only to swat away an occasional roach . . . looking at the pages *fearfully*, too. . . .

It was all there, in unwavering black on white. My name, "D.B. Winston," on my submissions (upper right hand corner, except for the occasional wise-guy editors who wanted it on the *left* hand side, like it *mattered*), no "Devorah," no "Ms.," or "Miss," or any indication of my sex, no inkling given that "D.B. Winston" *was* a woman. Oh, *occasionally* my checks from *Bloodbath*—including the one which caused me so much grief at the bank—came addressed to "Devorah Winston," since the editor there wormed the name out of me while I was still living back in Ewerton, but those checks were the exception, not the rule . . . according to my contracts, my few magazine subscriptions, and my bills, I was "D.B. Winston, Neuter" . . . except now, even *that* was subject to debate. . . .

Likewise, those 'zines which sent me either handwritten or personalized form rejections were all part of the pattern—either "Dear D.B." or "Dear D.B.W" or "Dear D.B. Winston," or, much worse, "Dear Mr. Winston" . . . something which had—ohmigod!—*amused me before! While the people who knew me, who saw me daily,*

still thought I was a woman. What did the opinion of someone I'd never seen matter? I knew that I was a woman, and everyone else *seemed* to know it when they saw me . . . then the loss of my literary femininity didn't seem very threatening. In fact, I figured it was *helping* me! Apparently others thought the same thing; one of the letters I got from the editor over at *Gore Magazine* (who did realize that I was a woman) put it best: "It's fun when I get the occasional comment about 'D.B. Winston: that guy's work is really good.' Tee-hee. Ah, the prejudices of the genre. Did you know that V.C. Andrews didn't know about her publisher substituting her initials until her first book came out?"

I only hoped that V.C. Andrews didn't have to go through *this* happy horseshit! Maybe that's why she gave interviews, telling people about the change . . . but I think that people at least *guessed* that she *was* a she. But most of my stories take a male point of view (or woodpile creature point of view, and so on), so the readers and editors had no way of *knowing*—unless I actually told them that I was a woman. I picked up a rejection slip from that new small press 'zine, *Prophetic!*, and read with blurring eyes, "All this time, my husband and I thought D.B. Winston was a man! What a surprise to see you sign your name 'Ms.'" That cover letter, the one I signed with a 'Ms.' (a rarity for *moi*, it must have been Susan B. Anthony's birthday, or some other such pro-feminist occasion) was a pure exception on my part, and I hadn't signed one like that to a new magazine I'd submitted to in months. Even my personal correspondence was genderless, and generated male-oriented responses ("Dear Mr. Winston, We are sorry you were dissatisfied with new Doggie Dinners . . ."), all of which seemed so *funny* at the time. With a growing sense of dis-ease, I scanned the contributor's copies of the zines which had run my material, and was confronted with table of contents after of table of contents crediting my stories to "D.B. Winston" or "Denton Blair," (and remembered that all the junk mail in my kitchenette garbage bag was addressed to "Mr. D.B., et cetera"—once I realized that the Great Computer Network Hook-Ups had my gender wrong, I was sure that I was *doomed!*) and on top of it, few of the magazines I had things published in bothered with author's pages (even if they did, how many people actually *read* those things?)

As the editor at *Gore* had pointed out, most of the writers in my field *are* men; readers *expect* them to be men, for who knows *what* reason. It was that automatic assignment of gender on the

part of readers that led me to use my initials instead of my name on my work, and played a part on my choice of a male *nom de plume*. Years ago, I had read an article about breaking into the publishing market that suggested that men have an edge when it comes to certain genres, and since I never liked my name *anyway* (to me, Deborah Bambi Winston had that good old cheerleader-Pom-Pom-Girl-Prom-Queen-Sorority-Sister ring to it, and plain old Deborah Winston had a small-town-paper-mill-office-clerk-playing-with-her-typewriter feel to it . . . which is what I *was* at first, when I started submitting things), so using my initials had seemed so appealing, so natural, so crisply efficient . . . and, unbeknownst to me, so very *masculine*, not merely androgonous, as I had hoped.

Crazy as it all sounded, it did make sense; wasn't that editor astonished to find out that I was really a woman? Which, in turn, meant that the impression that she and her husband had gotten that I was a man a strong one? And those readers writing to the *Gore* editor, about liking that "guy's work." After all, didn't Peter Pan, or some other fairy-tale kidlet, say that "wishing makes it so"? (I know he said "Clap your hands for Tinkerbelle," and all *that!*) So, if that's the case, wouldn't "Thinking makes it so" also apply? A wish *begins* as a thought . . . suddenly I remembered the note that the BQ editor put in with my contributor's copies, the one with the reader's survey results. That meant that a lot of readers—a lot of very *imaginative* horror and fantasy loving (*and* believing? I wondered)—readers had asked for my stories, many of them no doubt thinking (*believing*) that I was a man. I found the note, and if I had had doubts before—

"... fifth most requested author, behind Bloch and Williamson and Koontz, and you'd be surprised to see who else you topped on the list. Some of the readers can't help but scribble comments in the margins about their favorites, and about you they wrote, 'He's my favorite,' and 'That Winston dude scares me' I guess the readers really got into those macho-hero adventures about pagan sacrifices and bird-blood worship you wrote while you were living in Ewerton . . ."

—*That* was the capper. If only he had written one "Tee hee," or "I set *them* straight," or . . . I could only come to one conclusion. Even though he used to know that I am a woman, somehow, he had forgotten . . . or his mind had told him something else . . . or maybe, because so many people now believe that I am a man, he's doing so as a matter of course. Even the people I had just met, all of them were treating me as if I were *actually a man*.

It was funny, but after I finally figured it out (more or less); figured out what happened to me, *I couldn't do anything about it!* Bellevue may be overcrowded, but it was within the city limits and convenient. A good place to hide the "*pre-verts*" who *pretend* to be women. . . .

What made me hurt—above and beyond the embarrassment, the shouting, the bruised instep where old Mrs. Pendleton tromped on it—was the fact that even *telling* people that I was a woman didn't seem to help anymore—

Then, while I sat on the floor, hardly noticing the tickle of roach legs on *my* legs, I *thought* of something. And got to work.

By the time I was through, my hands and fingers were a hurt-in', my eyes were blurred from staring at endless black letters (sort of slate grey towards the end) marching across illuminated white paper, my tongue was coated with that slimy, gummy residue from licking too many stamps and envelope flaps (why wouldn't those damned dogs lick something besides their paws and fannies?) . . . but, finally, I was done. And I thought that it might work. *Had* to work. Please, pretty please with sugar on top work . . . and sugar on the bottom, if that might help.

From the afternoon when I sat on the floor, bemoaning my bizarre fate, to the day when I finally called it quits, a month later, I had written eight short stories, three poems, and a criticism of faceless/personalityless/mindless killers in 1980s dead-teenager mad slasher flicks ("Down with 'Jasonism' or Norman Bates Won't You Please Phone Your Mother?"). Plus cover letters for each submission with my full name, as in "Ms." and "Miss" added to the bottom sign-off—the works. I had to wait until dark to send them off (in a weird way I *missed* the sexist comments from strange guys); to both magazines which knew my work but not my sex, as well as newer zines I'd never tried before. Even though I left late, someone yelled "Drag Queen" at me from across the street . . . and I was only wearing a sundress! (It was too hot even for shorts, and besides, I thought that maybe I had to do a little *believing* on my own, to speed up the process . . .)

Only a week later, I couldn't help but think of that kiddie book, about The Little Engine That Could, who said "I think I can, I think I can," only in my case it was more like "I think I am, I think I am a WOMAN!" It happened! A cabbie, one I'd never seen before, who brought me home from a movie I took in one night (only fools and vampires ride the subways come night, whether

people think they are men or not!) actually said "Thanks, lady," when I told him to keep the change. I could have kissed the slob, three days' stubble or not! And better yet, I soon got back replies on most of the things I sent out; all with either rejection slips or contracts (!) addressed to "Miss" or "Ms." Winston!

I figured that it *had* to be working; Mrs. Pendleton didn't snort and toss her hair-netted head when she saw me coming down the hall, and Mr. Hernandez had finally stopped calling me a "*loco gringo*." All this put me in such a good mood I even considered springing for a long-distance call home. You know, "reach out and touch someone"—sung in *soprano*, for a change! The dogs were even licking my hands again, no more rumbling and tail-thump-less greetings. I decided to brave Bloomies again, too.

My wonderful mood continued when I got my contributor's copies of *Bloodbath*; the Potter cover was even better in color. Seeing it reminded me that I had to contact the editor about changing my name on future issues, but I figured that I had plenty of time for that. That night I tried calling home, no answer. They probably were at the bowling alley-cum-arcade, renting video tapes or something stimulating like that. I decided to try a daytime call, what the hell, surprise the folks, make 'em happy. Share the feeling.

More joy the next day: my check—my *great big check*—came from *Skin Magazine* for "The Metamanphosis," made out to "D.B. Winston." Looking it over, I decided to write The Editor and let him know that I wanted the by-line of the story changed. *Shouldn't be a biggie*, I told myself, kicking myself for actually forgetting something like a sale to *Skin*! Maybe I had *wanted* to forget it, make it not so by forgetting that something in my life had *prompted* such a tale . . . besides, I was sure that Mr. *Skin* Editor would get a kick out of the "Bambi" part of my name. I couldn't wait to tell my folks about the big check, but there was no answer in either the morning, afternoon, or evening. Slightly saddened, I tacked the check in a place on honor above my bed and resolved to call again the following morning . . . but something kept me from making that morning call.

The mailman had a hard time getting my contributor's copies from *Skin* into my box; the envelope covering them was badly torn. When I saw them, I ran down the street to the nearest kiosk, and found that the latest issue of *Skin Magazine*, with "D.B. Winston's "The Metamanphosis"—a Study of the Ultimate Identity Crisis!" advertised on the front cover, just to the left of the model's barely

covered nipple, was out for sale.

I zombie-walked back to my apartment ("the Ultimate Identity Crisis!") and after I locked the door behind me, I sat down on the bed to read the "Under the *Skin*" author's section. A brief mention of me was in there, a few lines about my publishing history, capped by the line "he is one of the best up-and-coming horror writers in America."

He, as in *me*. I looked in the tattered envelope which had held my contributor's copies. There was a note in there, written on *Skin*-logo paper. From the Editor. Said how much he liked, no *loved* the story, how he bumped an *Updike* from this issue to make room for my tale, so that his readers could enjoy it *now*. Said again how the first part had *almost* fooled him. Said he enjoyed talking to me in July. Said I should subscribe, special rate, to *Skin*, so he could use my name and likeness ("send a pic, should've asked in July, but the story just blew my mind and I forgot to ask") in those advertisements he runs in the front of *Skin* "Denton Blair Winston—a *Skin* Reader and proud of it." Said I should think it over and call, collect. Said there'd be money in it for me. Said I should come to the mansion, meet the "gang." Said his readers were bound to go wild over the story. Said I seemed to be a great guy.

He's right. *Now*. The man isn't only *rich*. He's *influential*.

As I finished the letter, Mom and Dad called *me*; they'd seen the new *Skin* on the back stands at the Ewerton Pharmacy, and wanted to let me know how happy they were. Dad said he's proud of his son. Mom said she hoped the gold-diggers wouldn't be after me once I made the "big bucks."

I *am* an only child.

And I didn't *think* my name is Denton. But I guess it beats Deborah.

Mrs. Pendelton spit at me in the hall; I ducked just in time.

I wonder if I can find a *suit* at Bloomies for the World Con?

What *do* men who read *Skin Magazine* get for advertising the fact?

I think the boys and I may need to move out of this place.

Thanks to Peggy Nadramia, editor of *Grue Magazine*, and Deborah Rasmussen, editor of *Portents*, for their kind permission to use quotations from their letters to me.

—A.R. Morlan

The Accounting

by G.L. RAISOR

Passage was difficult,
but still the men came,
their faces set with determination.
They knew what must be done.

Like maddened fireflies, the men swarmed through the night. Their lights punched random holes in the darkness to reveal a desolate landscape. No grass grew here; no birds sang; only a few twisted trees held to the hillside, defying gravity as they somehow clung with roots that resembled fleshy, grasping fingers. Shards of rock protruded from the earth like the scattered, broken teeth of some hapless giant. An ancient and fearful place, it was as if the land had been touched by some unimaginable blight.

Or evil.

Passage was difficult, but still the men came, their faces set with determination. They knew what must be done.

"We cannot allow this obscenity to take place again. Not in our town. An accounting must be held!" railed the leader of the tiny band, exhorting his followers, fanning anger into rage.

Like leaves on the wind, shouts of agreement swirled through their midst as they toiled up the slope.

Weary, near exhaustion, they finally crested the rise and pulled their coats close. The wind shrieked a warning, and when each man stared into the distance, anger slowly yielded to . . . fear . . . as the castle looked down upon them, massive and foreboding in its stillness, perched high atop the craig like some great, ancient bird of prey that might, at any moment, without warning, take flight into the valley below. Night did nothing to soften the stark outline of the edifice. Weathered stone testified mutely to time's



ravages. Much of the outside wall had collapsed and lay strewn across the ground, fallen markers of splendor long since departed. The castle was dying.

But it was not yet dead.

Inside, two men strode through the deserted hallways, their footsteps ringing with purpose. Both wore long white lab coats that fluttered uneasily in the draft, like the wings of pale moths. The tall man outdistanced his shorter, misshapen companion who struggled to keep pace. They moved toward a doorway that was only a thumbprint of light on the skin of darkness.

"Is everything ready?" the tall man asked.

The short, deformed assistant nodded assent, trying to mask his terror.

They entered an operating amphitheatre, stepping over mounds of electric cable that lay coiled and pulsing about the floor like huge, sleek pythons waiting to seize unwary prey. Banks of sophisticated electronic equipment hummed and crackled greedily. Overhead lights glared down. But their brightness could not dispel a dark expectancy that clung to the room.

Strapped to the operating table, an amorphous figure lay covered by a sheet.

Motionless as death.

Waiting for the life the two men would give.

"Tonight," the tall man promised, turning fever-bright eyes upon the hunchback, "we complete the work started so long ago. We have new technology . . . new procedures. Nothing can stop us now. We will bring life where there was no life!"

He turned from his companion in nightmare and busied himself at the equipment. The power surged, making the snakelike cables thrash in agitated motion against their moorings. A blue finger of electricity arced and began skittering across the room. The smell of ozone became noticeable as the very air began crackling with life.

The figure on the operating table convulsed and their gleeful laughter bounced off the walls, gradually rising to a fever pitch.

Suddenly, a hollow booming carried from below, freezing both men in place. They exchanged wary glances.

"Always there are those who would seek to stop my work," the tall man hissed, his anger terrible to behold. "See to the door. Hurry! We must not be disturbed!"

The small, bent figure hobbled away. Voices echoed through the hallway, ebbing and flowing, depositing half-heard threats upon the silence.

After a moment he returned, clutching a piece of paper.

"Another search warrant?"

"Oh Master, I'm sorry. It's all my fault. I tried to stop them, but they said they can no longer tolerate what we do here. They said an accounting is long overdue. I offered money—"

"What money?" the master thundered. "Damn your eyes, what are you saying?"

"That I . . ." the little man wailed incoherently, "... that I forgot to pay . . . that they're cutting off our—"

"Our heads?"

"No, much much worse," the grotesque servant lamented in a small voice, dropping his eyes in shame as darkness choked the room, "... our electricity . . ."

THE NIGHT SEASONS

by J. N. WILLIAMSON

Things were all right for a while.
 Few of the inmates were smart enough
 to be worried.
 After all, out of sight
 was out of mind.

Part IV of IV

IV

"My door is grave with oaken strength,
 The cool of linen calms my bed,
 And there at night I stretch my length,
 And envy no one but the dead."

—Dorothy Parker
Recurrence

1. The Rights and Wrongs of Spring

With the interior of county lockup reminding me of some ancient, Druidic ritual, I went up and down the corridor between the cells trying to calm the other men or answer their questions, trying not to imagine a stirring of things which rooted and grew in my head, limbs, or body. I think I went on functioning fairly well because it had dawned on me that I could go home soon. That afternoon, or the next day. When the horror was spent.

So if I had to perish the way others had, I stood a chance of being with people who cared for me. It was the first time I understood aged people I'd known who pleaded with loved ones not to let them die in nursing homes.

It was the guards who, presumably acting on Ellair's orders, had made the joint resemble a ritual of old. They'd passed out flashlights, to provide a modicum of illumination. Of course, even with

good Evereadies, they'd only last so long. I was bothered by the fact that the stockroom had supplied only enough flashlights for maybe one or two men in each cell.

I'd been assured that repairmen would be there by eleven that morning to fix the generator and air conditioner, but just then it was incredibly eerie wending my way along the corridor, catching mere glimpses of inmates lost in shadow. Here and there it was as if a laser beam caused a man to materialize, from nothingness, as the Evereadies shifted nervously in frightened hands. Still, the plunge from heat-drenching day to the infinitely darker but faintly cooler night had rendered us all relatively passive.

I kept my word about playing down the plants' deadliness because Ellair had kept his and the awful, lovely things had been carried away. I didn't know what he'd done with them but doubted he had destroyed them.

I got to spend a while with Doc, that final night. I sensed his amused skepticism at the deception I was obliged to pass along, and felt guilty as sin. But I faced the fact that however well I liked the old bird, he was, basically, a stranger who'd never even told me what he did when the tank wasn't home. Because every one of us is a tiny kid deep down, afraid of losing what we aren't sure we have any damn right to, keeping the truth from Doc made me feel both disloyal and unAmerican. We're raised to believe a boy's best friend is either his mom or his dog and that friendship is the last sacred icon of them all. And I'd called Doc "friend."

Now I wonder if any of the ghastly terror to come could have been averted or modified if I'd enlisted old Doc's assistance.

It was all right for a while. Eddie Po played tonk with some wizened old black they'd brought in just before noon. Al Calderone heard me out, nodded, even seemed to relax. The rangy, crewcut Clyde Leighton who might've been a great quarterback gave me a thumbs-up while his cellmates scanned a newspaper or leafed through *Penthouse*, yawning. Since the plants had been removed, the inmates were like little kids: a few were bright enough to remain worried but, for the others, out of sight was out of peril.

It was as if they had never heard of radiation and the other almost undetectable killers.

"Bless you for relieving my poor mind," Lester Piercy said, taking off his woman's toup to reveal short-cropped, fluffy hair the color of wheat. His eyelids batted and I realized he was on the verge of crying with gratitude. Then I saw his hand squeezed

between the bars—he'd almost dislodged a tower of books—and I hesitated, damnit, before shaking it.

And my mind flashed back to high school, to a dangerously thin kid called Harley, whom everybody punched. In the arm only, but as hard as they could. And I hadn't until a semi-athletic little fink named Baker got on my case about laying off and started giving me squinty looks, that clearly implied I might actually *like* the effeminate storklike Harley. So one morning after I'd watched the high school basketball team work out, I saw Harley in the hall, hauled off and hit him with every iota of power I possessed. And he inquired then, without sign of rancor or even real pain in his soft-eyed face, "Why'd you do that?"

I recall saying that I didn't know why. And I recall Harley peering down at me from his no-interest-in-sports scrawny height and murmuring, almost without a note of reproof, "You should at least hate someone before you hit him."

I caught Crock in my flashlight beam, two yards from Lester, lighting an unfiltered Pall Mall. Tall white letters on the scarlet pack read "Wherever Particular People Congregate." His eyes looked like cinders and it occurred to me that Crock gave the lie to those who swore evil didn't exist, that awful people merely performed acts the rest of us considered socially unacceptable. A nearly palpable aura of evil deeds committed, sins waiting to be done, rose with the auburn hair curling atop his head like a lapping tongue; it was incongruously pretty, and it scared me.

"I know you want Lester," he said. I wasn't sure he had spoken for a moment. His mouth moved so little round the Pall Mall, he might have been a ventriloquist; Lester was the dummy of record and I was Crock's unappreciative but mesmerized audience. What he'd said was so from the blue and off-center, I froze, became the puppet, listened to what else he said with a patience far too much like acknowledgement. "Or is it *me* you got the hots for?"

My movement away from the cell was close to a run, but I couldn't help it, I was toweringly angry and not a little bit scared. Crock had the reputation of completing the brutality he began by raping other men and, whether it was true or not, I didn't know because nobody ever talked. So I headed at half a trot toward Race Alyear's cell with something reaching down into my gut like the fungus and knew that men such as Crock twisted every fact into a vomitous mess *they* were eager to lap up—and that I'd have killed him that instant, if I'd been armed.

A controlled verbal commotion came like a steady cloud from the cells I passed and I heard prayers mingled both with cursing and occasional snores. But there was no sign of a riot—

Just Noble Ellair, falling into stride beside me, surprisingly, as we drew near Alyear's cell. "By George, I think the calamity has been averted," he said, scarcely audible. He looked proud of himself and that was merely irritating, not surprising. "They'll all be dropping off before long."

Dropping off wasn't my favorite term right then, I told Ellair. I wondered if the man was totally unfeeling; I thought about all the men who'd already perished.

Ellair seemed to smile. Then he stopped, touched my arm. "By the way, Stenvall, your family was here. I explained everything to them."

Amazed, I stared through shadows at his shifting features. "Ronnie, my wife? My kids?"

"Apparently they found the reports they'd received about you confused, or contradictory." He patted my shoulder, took a few steps toward Race's cell. "They were relieved to learn you'll be leaving here in a few hours."

Questions tumbled like lithe acrobats in my mind. "You could have told me they were here." I said, catching up with Ellair.

"I just did." He nodded toward the crooked gambler with an expression of satisfaction. "Looks as if he's already fallen off."

I glanced around him, into Alyear's cell, and knew at once Race wasn't moving one inch and probably would never do so again. Something is so *still* about death; dead things can't wait to merge in with the rest of nature, like mold. Like fungus.

Ellair realized it too, then, and the combination of his gasp and the cell gate being unlocked and swung wide at once turned the whole block quiet as dead things. Hundreds of people seemed to have squeezed into the cell with us, holding their breaths, gazing down with Ellair and I to notice how Alyear was rolled over on his cot with his big, fleshy face turned to the wall. Ellair shook him, roughly—

And some bodily reflex flopped him over on his back. With my Eveready full in his face, I saw that goddamned shit spurting out of his eyes.

I closed my own in horror, or sympathy. But when I looked again I had to see the way Alyear's eyeballs had been forced out of their sockets, how they were lost in there amid the curling growths.

Finally I saw them, detached and cockeyed, at the same point the fungus began *flowering*.

I couldn't even blame Noble Ellair when an unidentified inmate up the cell block demanded to know what the fuck was happening and the shrink yelled back, automatically, "Alyear's dead. The fungus—*blinded* him, *killed* him!"

But what Ellair's unthinking reply did to the other men would have to be forgiven by somebody vastly more charitable than I.

County lockup turned to Bedlam, like that. Someone—maybe he was serious, maybe he was a dumbass joker—screamed, "*It's GOT ME,*" and Ellair's flashlight beam spearing the darkness in search of the speaker only served to put all the inmates at center-stage. Tearful moans and groans, passionate prayers, shouts that were partly entreaties for freedom and partly obscure curses, practically tore the bars off the cells and the roof off the building. I had just enough time to think about Doctor Ellair's automatic truthful reply to the question about what had happened and to wonder if some people were physiologically created so very differently from others that their mere presence acted as a catalyst for the most untimely reactions in others; then Ellair and I were trotting up the corridor together, begging the men to be calm, calling whatever reassurance occurred to either to us. Down in the drunk tank, Calderone's shrill voice rose in a frenzy, whipping those nearest him into frothing terror, his misinterpreted Biblical citations soaring above the frightened and mumbling shouts like a hyena's wail. Other men hit their bars with anything handy, or slugged each other—

And for the first time I heard, from the women's wing, higher, flutier shrieks of fear. Gargan and the other available deputies stationed themselves along the corridor, a careful two or three feet beyond the reach of arms squeezed between bars. One message—only one—was common to the people I could see and those whom I could only hear: *Let me out. Let me have a chance to live.*

So I spun around to Noble Ellair, ready to enforce the plea in whatever fashion I found necessary—

And he was gone. The bastard had *run away*.

Before I could decide what to do, a squealing noise began that seemed to stun my soul, to shrink it. It was from a nearby cell and I flashed my light everywhere, trying to single it out—wanting—frankly—to stop it. It had made me think of infant pigs, little fat porkers being systematically slaughtered.

My beam pinned the squeal down, found Lester—and when I saw both him and the sadistic Crock and what they were doing, I realized Lester was even more angry—bitchy fucking mad—than he was terrified.

Homosexual and bisexual, harmless little guy and the meanest white man in town, had gone into a ballet of perfectly ghastly and lunatic dying.

Both men, like poor Dee Dee, had insanely decided to climb to the top of their cell—and, presumably, through it. But Dee Dee had mounted to his end alone, and Lester and Crock had chosen the *same* space—because it was instantly clear that little Lester was fighting the powerful Crock for his frightful place in a madman's sun.

Crock had a grip on the top bunk, but Lester, having crawled up the bars the way Dee Dee did, was doing his utmost to dislodge the thug. The squealing noises went on, earnest as hell, while Lester slapped at Crock's paw, then began prying at the fingers. All Crock was doing aside from hanging on for dear life was swinging his big, muscular body around so he could kick out furiously at the smaller man.

On one of Crock's flailing pivots, I saw that the seat of his pants was *filling*.

My first obvious impression—that he'd shit himself—proved wrong as I saw in my shaky flashlight beam what was beginning to spill out over the waistbands of the pimp's shorts and jail trousers: each man had been germinated, and was dying. The emerging stuff was more liquidy, even watery, than other growths I'd witnessed, but solid enough to perform the writhing, lifelike circumlocution that ultimately started to apply awful weight on Crock's tailbone. I saw again how damned high these old cells were; no one would desire to jump from the top and the floor was made of concrete.

What got me next, provided another tremor of horror, was the way the other guys in their cell—who could've supported Crock, or gently restrained Lester—just sat, watching. *Inmate TV*, I thought, wishing I had a key, knowing the guards would never hear me above the nightmarish clamor from the other cells.

But something of the former Lester Piercy broke through—some strain of kindness, the sort that had probably brought Lester a little-boy awareness of how he was to be detested—and he began trying, amazingly, to help the dangling procurer.

"Get away from me," Crock yelled. His face was red with fear

and unreasoning hatred. "Don't you fucking *touch* me!"

A light illumined Lester's pale face. To my surprise, he lashed out with a leg, kicking Crock directly in the ribs. "I'll touch you if I want, you bully, you bastard!" Lester squealed. Livid now, he gave Crock another kick and the big man's fingertips peeled away like old wallpaper.

He landed on his ass, hard, the fall peculiarly reminiscent of a silent movie scene with some sadistic Keystone Kop getting his. And the fall didn't kill Crock, either. Instead, to my amazement, I discovered that the fungus growing from Crock's rear had vanished from sight—and I realized that there was only place it could have gone: up into Crock's insides. It had rushed away from the impact of the fall to dart into his bowels, his stomach, his liver, his heart. My flashlight beam was squarely on the pimp as his rib cage expanded as if he had swallowed a great balloon. His belly began to blow up until I thought it must power its way through his chest, or decapitate the man.

Instead, Crock started bleeding. In torrents; from his mouth, and nostrils. And he looked startled, surprised that he, too, could experience pain the way all the whores and brutalized, unwilling lovers he'd tortured had known it. When he went over on his side it was as if someone had clubbed him from the opposite side, and *thwack!*—he was prone, blood everywhere, eyes wide; dead.

Something rotten inside me applauded. Because we all were in the habit of considering earthquakes, hurricanes, and male violence acts of nature and not all them were any such thing.

But Lester was down from his bars in two jumps as graceful as ballet dancers on PBS, and I thought for a second he might caress the dead Crock, or nurse him.

Lester was thinking of Number One, however, and I knew all at once he was as much a goner as Crock. He ran partway toward a rusted-out and lidless toilet in the corner but had to crash to his knees enroute and crawl, choking and gagging, the rest of the distance. I saw the same kind of horny/spiky substance I'd seen before slip between Lester's lips and move almost sinuously in the scream-filled night. Then he had his slender hands on either side of the toilet bowl and his head was forward, jerking back and forth as he choked to death and started flushing the john, over and over.

If I didn't get away from the two men at once, I knew, I'd go permanently insane.

2. Braindead at the Zoo

Lord, I wanted to go home. Maybe others had made it outside, I thought, and lurched up the corridor again. Deep down, I was simultaneously wondering if I'd go the way Lester and Crock had and trying to think only about home; about Ronnie, and the kids. Inmates cursed at me because of my relative liberty, threw things; I saw the drunk tank ahead of me and felt that I'd run a weird psychological obstacle course. I had glimpses of men running in uncanny circles as if engaged in the world's most important exercise routines. Clyde Leighton—a mean guy, I thought, not a bully of Crock's ilk—was in his cell with tears flooding his cheeks. God help me, I *grinned*—because I was Out There, and Leighton wasn't. This was a zoo, I told myself, and I was the trained orangutan who'd got out and was fleeing, knuckles dragging, making *ooog-ooog* sounds of joy that mingled with the incongruity of a radio (Dee Dee's, maybe) blasting out the Top Forty. My wobbly Eveready picked out an aged stranger curled into a fetal position on his back and mushroom crap was squirming its way through a Bible—not just Al Calderone's New Testament—to boogie a good two feet above the poor old sonofabitch. *Repent!* I said noiselessly to him, laughing as if I'd just said the funniest thing.

And when I'd all but reached the drunk tank and felt as if I were coming home, arriving at an oasis in some human desert, I was actually, incomprehensibly *excited!* And while I know now that life ought never to make you feel better because you've seen dead persons and counted them and not discovered yourself among their number, I can't honestly apologize for it. I think you had to be there.

Why the cell door was open, I've never learned.

I guess I'll never be told why my friend Doc had to die, either. The cosmic reason, that is. But I had one flashlighted glimpse of him in that jail that seemed to make him so much less than I figured him to be, that Good Guy whom nobody got mad at and who'd been brushed aside by wider society because something essential to him required alcoholic refreshments to stay sane and functioning, and the puffy substance growing from Doc made me rip the beam away—spray it over the other bodies sprawled on the floor as if I'd come to water them. I've no idea how many were there; with the door open, inmates from other cells had rushed inside as if Doc and his pals had held open house. But there were dozens, anyway, collapsed upon one another, and two thoughts

made me shudder in fresh terror. All these guys had died in the past eighteen or twenty *minutes*—

And one of them, near my feet, was groaning.

It took a frantic, icy second to figure out who the living one was and, when I did, I groaned back at him. It was Al Caderone, unconscious but not, I realized as I half-stooped to examine him, germinated.

Why, Father? I asked in my head. *Did You spare him simply because he read part of Your Book?*

"WITCHID."

The voice said the sound just like that. Behind me. In a dark, small space I'd believed stuffed with the dead. A quasi-human voice that made me freeze in place and wonder if some retarded idiot had wandered into the jail, into hell. And it sounded again, *directly* at my stooped back: "WITCHID."

I glanced around and saw spiky cactus and black, wiry twigs. Cauliflower that looked goddamned edible—and those mushrooms and everything else the entomogenic had to offer except fucking *toadstools*—sticking out of It everywhere I looked.

I guessed it had seen me and pushed itself laboriously first to one knee and then the other and tottered toward me somehow, and I guessed—no, I knew it; I just didn't quite accept it—that it was Doc.

Trying, very hard, to talk. To me.

What there was about the truly disfigured, the utterly blighted, that kept us from identifying with it I didn't wish to admit to myself. Of course, it's that such horrors inform us *we* might look like that, should the worst occur. And there's the fact that this was no Doc Kinsey I'd ever known, and we resist complete change in the familiar; so I edged away several paces—fast—and threw my stupid hands before my face, nearly making the sign of the cross.

"WITCHID...?"

No, I thought. I shook my head. This zombie thing was all the nightmares I'd ever had and all the ones I'd lived through that week, this walking garden of death—and it put out this more-or-less *hand* entirely wrapped in oozing white substance shit, like a fucking *mitten*, and I thought *It wants me to take that thing*.

"They're UP!" Voice from the vicinity of my knees. Voice from a clump of shadows; Calderone, his gleeful prophecy fulfilled. "Praise the Lord, they're *up*—they're *here*!"

I think my mouth fell open, and I know Al clung to one of my legs like a human growth—

And I'm sure Doc fell on Al. Fell all over him.

Intentionally? How the hell would *I* know? I simply saw that vegetable garden move faintly and collapse atop Calderone like a blobby vampire eager to feed.

And Al began screaming and twisting around beneath Doc—
And *I was out of there, man—I was GONE!*

—And seeing Gargan before me with his eyes dully fixed on my face. He was leaning against the wall, and I didn't even remember running the rest of the way toward his guardpost at the end of the corridor but I knew abruptly that I wasn't going to try to run through the office to the personnel door but turn right, bolt up the stairs in search of Doctor Noble Ellair.

Yet I saw, around the exhausted old guard, that the door leading to freedom was unbolted; ajar; left *open*; and I remembered that I'd seen no other guards, and understood that they'd fled.

Gargan, I thought, brave crotchety old SOB, stayed behind, and he would try to keep me from finding Ellair . . .

"I don't want to hurt you, old man," I said. "And I don't think you want any more killing here. So I'm going upstairs now, all right?"

No answer. Gaze fixed on mine.

"Look, Gargan." I tried to catch a breath. "That ghoul Ellair, he's behind it all. So okay; maybe nobody's guilty in a way—but someone has to pay. Right?" And I cut to his right, my muscles tensing. "Isn't that true? Isn't that the system?"

Gargan, I thought, nodded. Then his head kept going forward and I watched his whole, aged body go along.

Face down, on the floor. With fungus straining against his proud uniform shirt, seeking an exit from his spine, his bloodstream. "Poor old man," I said shortly, aloud, but with all the feeling including the mildest of surprise expended, drained away. Nothing was left inside me that made me human then, unless you wanted to count the plans for the violence I meant to wreak upon Noble Ellair.

I'd pivoted to begin trudging up the steps—stalking them—when I heard the sounds of another living person through Gargan's office, from the vicinity of the open door. Somebody alive, when, I realized, the psychiatrist and I might be the only ones left.

When my ears told me it was more than one person, and that they might keep me from doing what I meant to do, I made my weary legs run the rest of the way.

3. Moms Don't Lie

It was too late to tiptoe and I was too tired. Whether Ellair had intended bringing such agony and death or not, he'd run away, he'd *stayed* away, and the dis-ease was back on me and my early-warning system was going crazy and my pulse and was pounding frighteningly—

But I simply pushed Ellair's door open, then paused in the entrance.

His emergency lamp was lit, the room was silent, and I believed for a moment that Ellair had left the building. Inside the office, I reached out to close the door, silently, and halted with my arm outthrust.

An overpowering, cloying sweet scent permeated the place. It was steeped in shadow despite the lamp but I made out an inner door, partly concealed by Ellair's chair. Taking a step toward it, I was suffused anew by heat, pouring from that open door—a heady, sapping heat far worse than that of the rest of the jail. The sweet stink made me think of garbage piled against Manhattan curbs; and corpses . . .

Claustrophobia nearly overwhelmed me when I willed my way through the door to the nursery and eased it shut behind me. It was a long room fluorescently illumined by a secret power source and, unable to see clearly for another second, I felt I was walking *down*—descending into a yawning grave. Squishy, yellowish air swirled at waist length as if meaning to adhere to me but, for an instant, I saw no sign of human life.

Just the strange, bottomed-out impression, the sticky heat, and Noble Ellair's plants in all their exotic variety.

The ones he had gathered up, I thought. And realized I had no way of knowing which wild Indian plants still contained entomogenic spores and which ones had been spent . . .

"There you are, Stenvall!"

I didn't know whether he'd been watering them, genuflecting before them, or what. Ellair popped into sight many rows ahead of me, nonchalant and unperturbed, stark naked.

He looked like an impoverished scarecrow going back to work after a lunchbreak, fish-white from neck to long toes. But I knew he would never eat crow. If one started with the assumption that one was right in everything he did, because he was genetically superior, or scholastically, it was hard to be humble and impossible, ever, to be wrong.

"You sound like you expected me," I said.

He came closer, spring-heeled. Everything about him was gaunt, dangling, pasty. But he was as much in control as if he'd donned a tuxedo. "If anybody," Ellair murmured, bright-eyed. "Is it over?"

I could only nod.

"Curious, is it not?" Chatty now, he was two feet away; but he stopped, studying my expression to see if I understood. "That you are the sole survivor."

"Al Calderone may still be alive." He wasn't even sweating. "And there's you. And me."

"How symbolic!" He seemed taller, nude. "A triumvirate, with me as the father figure, you, who spoke for me, as the son—and a neurotic zealot as the holy ghost!" Before I could answer him, he clapped his hands, once, and gestured. "Come along! There's something I'd like to show you!"

He initiated a zigzagging path between the rows of beautiful plants, confident I'd follow but not murder him. Not yet, anyway. I had no weapon but my hands—no training whatever in effective neck-breaking—and the fury I experienced wanted Ellair never to have lived at all more than it sought revenge. After gaping after him briefly, I followed.

He paused before several ornately designed screens, arranged so that they formed a seven-foot-high closet of sorts. *What next?* I wondered. Ellair raised an index finger; it was like Public Speaking 101. "Do you know, Mr. Stenvall, what a fluke is?"

I thought about all that had happened to me and half-nodded. But I knew he didn't mean that kind of fluke. The heady smell of a hundred diabetic fat man breathing my way combined with Ellair's inexhaustible inventory of surprises to enervate if not completely confuse me.

"I refer, sir," he said, "to *Dicrocoelium dendriticum*—the parasite whose cooperative but unwilling host is the simple ant."

What was behind the screens? I touched the closest, part curious, part driven to run. Anywhere. "Why the hell weren't you a biologist or a botanist instead of a shrink, Ellair?"

A rising brow gave his face the look of an open quotation mark waiting for a line of dialogue. Ellair provided it, surprising me further. "I wished to be the brain, as it were, behind the brain worm." He saw the question mark on my face. "The brain worm is a parasite which exercises mind control over the ant. Its correct

name is *Dicrocoelium* and it uses the ant in order to get to . . . the sheep!"

He grinned at me as if waiting for me to get it. "What sheep, damn it?"

He was patient. "The brain worm encysts in the belly of the ant a larva that alters its cells until it is reedlike. Employing the ant's assistance, it attacks the sheep. Don't you see—don't you recognize the parallels?"

"I guess you had to be there," I mumbled wearily.

"But you *have* been!" Ellair exclaimed. "You see, the fluke worm forces the ant to climb a stalk of grass and wait for the sheep. When the sheep *eats* the mad, suicidal ant, our brain worm has a wonderful new home within the larger, juicier sheep! Why, its range of possibilities—of options—is marvelously increased."

I wished to be, he'd told me, *the brain behind the brain worm*. Meaning he saw the fungus as the fluke, the inmates as the ants—but whom did he consider the sheep?

On impulse, I seized the nearest ornamental screen in my hands and threw it aside.

Clyde Leighton, the would-be quarterback, stood . . . *frozen in mid-stride*.

The fungus had left gaping holes in him from head to toe, but apparently it had abandoned him. Now, in death, he stood with his hands fisted, one elbow drawn back, the other elbow and hand raised; one leg was bent slightly, as if ready to run. But Leighton wasn't going anywhere again. The eyeless, swiss-cheese corpse made me think of the woolly mammoth frozen for all time in the process of digestion.

"Something happened, Stenvall," Ellair said, scarcely above a whisper, "just before I began bestowing my good will gifts. Something—a bomb, perhaps, a chemical gas—that modified the *Entomogenic*, enabled it to expand its horizons, to possess the mind and nervous system of a man precisely the way the fluke possesses the ant. God knows who or what made it happen—"

"God?" I repeated, trying to stop looking at Clyde Leighton. The name of the divinity sounded all wrong coming from this nutcase, this . . . opportunist. "Put the screen back up, Ellair."

"Stenvall, I'm telling you the truth!" Ellair suddenly seemed so petulant, so solemnly anxious to be understood, that I realized he was being sincere. "The day you were arrested, three scientists I know—good men—called to tell me that there were . . . unnatural

disturbances. That they expected the heat to soar, to go through the ceiling—just as it did.”

“Damn it, I’ll replace the screen!” I grumbled, and did it. But I hadn’t quit listening. Too many unexplainable phenomena, too much had gone wrong, to blame it all on his goddamn plants. “You’re saying that the pattern you’d expected the fungus to follow changed on you because some explosion somewhere drove the heat up?”

His head bobbed eagerly. “That, and God knows what else was changed!” He gestured to the screens and the dead man behind them. “The fungus has made amazing evolutionary leaps in a matter of hours, and I had nothing to do with that.”

“But you’re willing to take advantage of the situation, right?” I snarled. “What next? You plan to *train* the fungus, use it to *motivate* people—use it to threaten them with hideous death unless they do what you want?”

He blinked several times, evasive again, and turned to half-dance across the nursery. “I’m intrigued by such possibilities, of course! What scientist wouldn’t be?”

I trailed after him, my fury renewed. “You crazy bastard, you don’t care—”

“Not crazy!” He halted, wheeled to face me, perspiring at last. From his passion, his devotions, I thought. “I’m no science fiction film ‘mad doctor,’ damn you—I’m a *businessman*! My motives were one-hundred-percent practical!”

“You were going to make a buck from this?” I was incredulous. “Big bucks?”

He hissed two words at me, his eyes enormous. “*Pest control!*” he shared his secret at last. “Agricultural pest control, Mr. Stenvall. And I selected a public institution for my experiments, chose the worthless as my test subjects instead of wantonly working with the worthwhile—”

“We didn’t volunteer, goddamn you!”

“The potential good of my work far outweighed the risks!” Ellair declared. Thin arms crossed on his naked, narrow chest, he’d become a warning label on a poison bottle. “I’m developing a spray that’s the first, foolproof biological control of agricultural pests, Mr. Stenvall—a spray that means vastly greater food production, for us and the hungry of the world!”

“A spray to make *you* billions!” I told him, livid.

One of the screens concealing Clyde Leighton slipped, and fell.

Ellair turned his head instantly to stare and the expression of bare guilt on his face—of new, nearly superstitious terror—emboldened me.

I hit him harder than I'd ever hit a man before.

Ellair went down among his good will gifts. Two, then three pots broke; were smashed. Terrified now for good reason, Ellair threw out a panicky arm and accidentally shattered two more plants. And the spores were shooting into him before he could start scrambling to his feet.

One look was sufficient and I whipped around to dash for the nursery door, crazily sure that the fungus was following me, swearing I wouldn't look back before I was out of that hell's hothouse.

But I did look, saw Noble Ellair rising, then standing, his skinny arms outflung, his skinny legs starting to propel him after me. I still didn't understand why the *Entomogenic* hadn't attacked me but it was revoltingly clear they'd finally attacked the good doctor. Attacked him, and were working on his almost emaciated anatomy more quickly than I'd seen the fungus destroy anybody else. I didn't know if it was still evolving or, if it was, what new kind of monstrosity they'd make of Ellair.

But I knew that if he didn't have a way to stop the process, no one did.

My hesitation had let him draw within five staggering feet of me, and I wrenched the nursery door open with absolute determination to barricade the bastard inside. That wouldn't kill him, I told myself—unless he had an antidote somewhere with him—but this SOB wouldn't die where the decent men had perished.

But I had the sudden frightening impression—a feeling—that the thrashing noises behind me were more than Noble Ellair, alone, could produce; and my imagination pictured all too vividly for my tastes the next evolutionary leap of the *Entomogenic*: if it could stop a running man in his tracks, maybe it could make him *move* again. Maybe Clyde was going after the careless, opportunistic son of a bitch who'd killed him.

Before I could turn, Ellair's hand was at my shoulder. It felt simultaneously feverishly hot, and clammy. "No one ... wins ... such things as this," he gasped. From the way he was talking I knew he was already changing inside. I took a step out the door but he dragged his feet after me, still holding on. "But my name ... Stenvall, my *name* ... will survive me."

What he'd said coupled with the stink he was giving off disgusted me. "Only if I tell people exactly what happened," I snapped. "And if you want me to—I won't."

He wrapped his thin arms around me from behind and before I could tear away, I saw fistulas forming in his pores, heard terrible popping sounds. That skin on his arms which was not giving way to the growths was pink as a baby's.

"You . . . forget, Mr. Stenvall," he managed, lips close to my shrinking ear. "Inmates have . . . *already* left here."

An intimation of his meaning galvanized me. I swung back an elbow, breaking his hold, jumped through the doorway and slammed the door shut, praying it would be thick enough to prevent me from hearing the last of Noble Ellair's remarks.

It wasn't. But first, he laughed. Giggled. "Stenvall," he gasped, ignoring the pain to raise his voice and make me understand it fully, keep me from ever forgetting it, "the inmates who left . . . took their gifts . . . *home* with them."

"Damn you!" I shoved his desk across the carpeted office in fierce little spurts with a strength I normally could not have commanded. It barred half the nursery door and, I thought, he wouldn't have enough energy left to budge it.

But he started pounding on the door, heavily, still making the giggling, half-choked noise, and it was as if I had aroused something long-sleeping on the inside of a tomb. I froze for a moment, emotions escalating within me, a description of them beyond the power of language. I began casting frantic, wild-eyed glances about, searching for something to strike him with if he succeeded in shoving the desk aside; I sat on it with my full weight, tried to brace my hands and arms against the wall. When I was on the verge of believing that something *else* moved noisily from the other side of the door—something that had been far more human than Noble Ellair but was now, perhaps, the awful monster of his creation—silence fell in the nursery with something as weighty as the total collapse of a human body.

Then nothing was on the air but the cloying, reeking, elusively deceptive sweetness of exotic plants, uncoiling their hidden and deadly tentacles.

In an instant I was out in the second floor hallway, wobbly as hell, imagining with every difficult step that I heard whispers of dark intent drifting to me on the hot, pungent air.

Another moment and I was hurrying down the corridor to the

stairs with a sensation of being pursued by devils.

4. No One But The Dead

Going down a flight of steps is always easier than going up until your legs feel bonelessly exhausted and threaten not to support you. You grow conscious, then, of injury if you fall and everything in your body begins to stiffen—making you far more awkward and apt to slip.

That's the way it was when I'd trotted down a few steps, was nearing the landing—

And as I glanced through the barred window, I heard and felt in my veins and through my nerves a sonic boom that exploded so abruptly and so shatteringly that I completely lost my balance.

And in the intensified fraction of a second before my body actually began to fall, there was this almost blinding *flash of dazzling light*—in itself perfectly still, somehow awesome in its stark silence—and my memory was sharply triggered—

Yielding up—unsought—what Doctor Ellair had so enigmatically said to me in his garden of death flowers: *Just before I began bestowing my good will gifts, something happened.* The chill that had vibrated in me when he spoke was beyond forgetting. *A bomb, perhaps, Ellair'd gone on, a chemical gas.* Other scientists had phoned to tell him of "unnatural disturbances." And, *God knows what else was changed.*

A very strange, discomfiting, forbidding term—I half tumbled, half slid the rest of the way downstairs, striking my head on the wall just outside Gargan's office and, still stuck in the shrink's nightmare nursery, felt the bizarre flood of light burning itself in my thoughts forever—a *new* phrase I'd never heard before but one that might have been hissed telepathically at me by Noble Ellair from where he lay, dying—took shape in my mind: *A reality bomb.* Dazed and hurt, I knew with an unsummoned resurgence of my old dis-ease that the city had been *attacked*, twice, at least, by some sort of explosive, a Strangelovian/Strangelovecraftian weapon—hell, I didn't really know what to think—or by *some* god-damned force that had knocked the world head over ass.

And again, *I* was supposed to help. Hell, it was there for me to see, I couldn't miss it then. It had been there since the oddball fucking incidents at the complex (young Stefanie Tyder, naked, letting me in; gay Mr. Cunningham having me stomp on weird damned *attack ants!*) even before the kids went back to school ("It's like

the clouds are pregnant and what they're delivering will be . . . monstrous") and I got wasted ("Something's growing out there and it's EVIL"). It'd been there to see in the way the fungus had gone berserk; it had been evident in the cruelly worsening ways that the inmates had died; and it was the product of Ellair and *something* like a reality bomb and it had fucking *changed the nature of reality, itself*.

"Rich," this voice whispered from above me. Feathery light; familiar.

And when I peered up at the silk-clad legs, at the woman's skirt—from where I was sprawled—I thought for one panicky second that newly warped nature was already trying to prove my theory for me.

So I whispered back, wonderingly, "Ronnie. . .?"

(Markie, four, seeing a shivering early robin, saying with ponderous, grave earnestness, "He mustn't have no calendar." No, we mustn't. Or perhaps we do need a new kind—)

"Ron, honey, what are you doing here?"

I asked it hoping to heaven she would be real, legit, actually stooping beside me the way she seemed to be, holding my bruised head and starting to help me up. —Was that the kids there behind her, in jail?

("Everything's supposed t'be new," my seven-year-old stepdaughter Bett had wish-fulfilled, "at spring. Right?" Rii-iiight.)

"Rich, they said you could go home now." Pale, Ron was white-faced the way a woman ought to look if she'd wandered between the rows of cells and peered inside at mass death. "They phoned."

"Who said?" I demanded, and leaned on her a moment to clear the cobwebs away. Awkwardly, I put out an arm to rumple Markie's and Bett's hair. Bett pulled back, just enough to notice. "Who called you?"

("More pap for the masses. Bread and circuses to keep us from knowing what's really going on.")

"The man," Ron replied querulously, and I realized she was puzzled, that there might be a thousand horrifying questions in that sweet, familiar mom's-face. But I also noticed that old Gargan's uniformed body was no longer lying where he had fallen. "Some doctor, Richie; Ayres or something. . ."

Who'd moved the old guard's body? Who *else* had arrived?

Markie, grinning, wriggled his fingers at me (*Smarter than the average bear*) and I noticed how he and Bett were clustered by

Ronnie's sides the way kids do when frightening things remind them of how small they are and how little they know about the so-called grownup world.

But even as I leaned over with an aching head to kiss my boy, I couldn't tell whether any of them had seen inside the cells and I couldn't think of a way to *ask* Ron without scaring the children, making all three of them want to Go See.

It took me another bewildered moment to realize that they had simply entered the building and passed—unimpeded and presumably uninterrupted—through the guards' office, outside which my tumbling body had greeted them.

The way I pieced it together finally was that I was staring straight through the empty office, and the door was still ajar . . .

"Let's go home," I said softly. I put my arms around the kids' shoulders and sort of began striding toward Ron, obliging her to turn and head in the direction I'd chosen. The way that led out of *there*; the direction of *Anygoddamwhereelse*.

"Shouldn't you check out, or sign something?" my wife inquired, trying to pause. But I was marching adamantly forward. "What about your things—whatever they took from you when they brought you here?"

I said again, "Let's go home"—

And angled my body and my face so I could take a quick but sure look into the area of the inmate cells—see my home-away-from-home one last time and try, before we were out of there for good, to learn what happened while I was upstairs with Ellair.

All the doors to the cells stood wide open. There wasn't a sound—the almost unbearable heat ballooned out at us the way it should have, along with the reeking unforgettable metallic smell of mucho blood spilled—

But I didn't see a single corpse. Not one. There wasn't a body in sight, nor was there at a glimpse a trace of anything *else* in any of the deserted cells.

But as my hasty yet riveted gaze swung down that grave-still, familiar corridor, I saw at the far end of the area something much wider than the door to deadlock and so high above the concrete floor that it was hunched, scraping, against the ceiling. Something that could have been an immense green hothouse plant, not yet, I thought, quite alive but edging toward it as it grew. (*It was there to see, everywhere. You didn't have to read about an earthquake or watch the evening news—nature furnished us with obvious signs—*

from rain falling for a record number of days and knee-deep snowdrifts, to basically unexplainable changes in temperature and to the haunted, hollow looks in the eyes of little kids, and their tense mothers. You saw the rise in self-destruction on the part of teenagers—*didn't that make it clear?*)

We stepped outside, I felt a sudden breeze cut the back of my sweat-soaked neck like a razor blade, and halfway down the block I watched a page from a newspaper rise with the gust to inform me of how shockingly *cold* it was. I couldn't believe it was still June, couldn't believe the drop in temperature; but I saw my car parked at the curb, where Ron had apparently left it when she and the kids went inside to get me, the same beat-up '79 Omni—

That I'd been *driving* when the cops stopped me.

So how had Ronnie gotten it?

Seeing I'd stopped walking, or sensing the rise of apprehension I had experienced, Ron glanced over her shoulder at me, questioning.

"Home," I said firmly, and squeezed the kids' shoulders. Markie started for the Omni at a trot. Bett giggled.

Which was when I realized a short man with a fat moon-shaped face was sitting behind the wheel, in the driver's seat.

"Al," I whispered, and threw up my arm to shout to Markie, warn him away from what I saw next.

The sight caught the words in my throat and I felt little Bett shudder against me, realized Ronnie, after breaking stride with horror, was rushing after Markie to stop him.

Al Calderone, surviving the fungus and poor Doc's last attack until now, had rolled down the Omni window and had begun to wave to us. How he'd known it was my car, I had no idea; it was the only vehicle parked on the block so maybe he was as shocked to see me alive as I was to see him, maybe he'd simply wandered through the open door of the jail and made it no farther than that.

And maybe the chill breeze of the abnormally cold June day did to him what the steaming heat inside the joint had failed to do. All I knew was what I got to see: stuffs coming out of his round face and plump, uplifted arm—not the substances I had seen but something like lichen, growing on a rock. Stuffs that resembled that utterly peculiar crust that grows on old food left to sit, forgotten, at the back of the family refrigerator.

Whether Al would have harmed Markie, I don't know; but I

ran past both Ronnie and my boy and out into the silent street—where in Jesus' name was the traffic, where were the *people*?—and halted just beyond the rolled-down window, staring in as the evolving fungus or the next product of what I'd called a reality bomb transformed "Reverend" Al into something protoplasmic, crusted, repulsive, and unreal.

I don't think the kids or even my wife heard what Al said. He could barely move the lips that were being eaten up from inside, covered swiftly with scale and scum.

But he succeeded in making his visible eye *wink* at me, before his whole face was occluded and I recognized completely for the first time how tenuous, how fragile, was the tissue of our accepted reality. (*I wanted her Jesus eyes to open one more time and scare me with a remark I might forget an hour later.*)

"They're beginning." Concealing my disgust, I stooped to place my ear beside that moist, puckering grotesquerie of a mouth. "Yes, Lord, they're here!" Al croaked. He craned what was left of his neck and, before I could draw back, he'd kissed my cheek.

His final message reached me even when I'd reeled away: "They've started, Richie! *The night seasons . . .*"

Megamouse

by JAY SHECKLEY

This was it: the towering man-made rodent that'd been mega-dosed in vitro with rat hormones and bamboo DNA.

Three soft-drink executives, dressed for success, squinted uneasily at the sooty horizon.

"The news swears it's headed here," Ms. Marblehead reported.

"I can live without seeing this 'Supermouse,'" declared Eliot Swain, Managerial Vice-President.

"Megamouse," Ms. Marblehead corrected. "He's called Megamouse."

Neil Oddum, the young director of advertising and product research, just pointed.

At the sight of the eighty-foot-tall mouse, all commentary stopped. This was it: the towering man-made rodent from the eleven o'clock news now trampled the Amtrak station. They watched a green neon GO BY TRAIN sign as it tilted, fell, and was dashed to splinters.

Across the courtyard from their executive suite stood the company's fanciful logo—a four-storey lucite soda glass stencilled with white circles for bubbles. The famous beast, mega-dosed in vitro with rat hormones and bamboo DNA, already looked as large as the bogus tumbler. And it was still two blocks away.

After the Texaco station was stomped out of existence by Megamouse's huge feet, Neil broke the silence. "This is so wild. Ever see *Mothra*?"

"You're terrible," Ms. Marblehead said. The animal's tail, like an oversize pink vacuum hose, whipped toward the plate glass windows of McDonald's. At the sound of *smash!* the woman added, "What the bejeez are you doing?"

"It's marked 'In Case of Emergency,'" explained Eliot Swain.

He had already dismantled the built-in industrial-size fire extinguisher. After wrapping endless matte-grey hose into a large donut, he hoisted it onto his shoulder and headed for the elevators.

"In the movies," Neil said, "You'd beg Eliot not to be foolish."

Ms. Marblehead looked up at the ceiling, then at the approaching mouse. "Think *we're* safe?"

Neil shrugged. Far below, they saw Eliot Swain roll out hose between the bottling plant and the promotional soda glass, then ascending the ladder used to clean it. The pair upstairs looked at each other with the facial equivalent of a shrug. Outside, the huge pest lumbered toward the glass, attracted by Eliot's motion. Neil and Ms. Marblehead got a good view of the massive chestnut eyes, and of the enormous pointed teeth behind its long rabbit-like incisors. Its gargantuan snout pulsed, raking the air with its whiskers.

The sun peered out between clouds and danced along these tusks as Megamouse sniffed closer and closer to the exposed man.

"How do you think he tastes?" Ms. Marblehead asked.

"Eliot?"

"Mmm."

"You're *terrible!*"

Outside, the valiant young executive finished filling the lucite fountain glass with sparkling pop, then fled with inspired swiftness into the company's offices.

When he rejoined the others at the window, he was still out of breath and his grey wool suit had darkened under the arms and down his back.

Outside, the colossal mouse kept gulping as much soda as it could, while making a shocking amount of noise slurping and spilling the beverage all around the glass immense base. When the thirsty rodent finished, it sat—*thump!*—and gazed at the building with startled eyes as if it could see the people.

Megamouse stared long and hard. Then a tremor was heard. RUMBLE RUMBLE RUMBLE. RUMBLE RUMBLE RUMBLE. RUMBLE RUMBLE RUMBLE.

The mysterious sound grew louder. RUMBLE RUMBLE RUMBLE! RUMBLE RUMBLE RUMBLE! RUMBLE RUMBLE RUMBLE RUMBLE!

Then for one peaceful moment, only silence.

Which was followed by:



BLAM!!

The laboratory-evolved menace had exploded. Mammoth-size mouse innards rained from the sky. Ms. Marblehead turned away fast. Just as well: Soon, juicy red hunks of mouse intestine and bits of eye like raw egg were slipping down the picture window, trailing red.

Neil yelled "*What!?*" He pressed his face against the pane's clean side, amazed. Now the courtyard was strewn with giant ruddy bones. Beside the big drinking glass, a huge brown kidney slowly rocked in place.

"That's how we do it on the farm," remarked Eliot Swain. "Leave out a bowl of pop overnight for the little guys, and *pop!* Mice can't burp, you know. Not even Supermouse."

"Megamouse," Ms. Marblehead insisted. Catching sight of the window, she suddenly looked sick.

"That reminds me," Eliot said. He pictured the company cafeteria's mannicotti. "I never got lunch."

The Jukebox Man

by DEAN WESLEY SMITH

"It's only a jukebox," the man said.
 "All it's going to do is play a song.
 What can it hurt?"

Friday: Eight P.M.

"All right. Who's going to be first?" the Jukebox Man asked the crowded bar.

The silence made me damn nervous. My name is Radley Stout. I own Fontaine's Bar and Lounge. I don't like silence in my place. Especially when the place is crowded. It makes me think of no business and thinking of no business gives me the shakes.

The Jukebox Man is Paul. Paul Turner. He owns Turner's Electric down on Third. He's the one that decided the old jukebox needed repair. He discovered what it could really do. That was Wednesday afternoon. Paul tried it twice and I did it once. Now, because of both our big mouths, there's twenty-five to thirty of my best customers that want to try it. But not one of them wants to raise their hand to be first.

When I think about it, that jukebox gives me the willies. It feels like trouble. Not that I don't like what it does. Hell, being with Jenny again was the best thing that happened to this old body in years. The problem is more like a good cold drink on a hot day. You just can't get enough. That's what Paul said was going to make me rich.

"Come on, someone," Paul, the Jukebox Man, said. "Ten minutes ago, you all wanted to see how it worked. Now's the time." No one moved.

"It's only a jukebox. All it's going to do is play a song. Right? What can it hurt? Radley, you want to go again?"

"Sure do," I said and smiled real big. "But I got these drinks to make. Besides, I can go after all you folks have left." I pretended

to be digging in the well, then filled two glasses with ice. I told the truth about wanting to go. I did, but it just plain scared me. Scared me that I wanted to see Jenny again so bad. Scared me something might happen.

Paul walked away from the newly polished jukebox and headed down the aisle between the booths. All the heads turned in unison to follow his progress. He was a big man, two-forty if an ounce, with arms that strained the short sleeves of his white t-shirt. He stopped in front of Craig.

"You said you had a favorite song on there," Paul said, and pointed back in the direction of the bar and the jukebox. "What say you go for it first?"

Craig looked across the booth at his girlfriend Cynthia, then crushed out his cigarette. "What the hell. Why not?"

"Great," Paul said and almost lifted Craig out of the booth by the arm. Everyone laughed and the tension broke. Again the sound of bar glasses clicking against the hard tables mixed with the smoke. The noise made me feel one hell of a lot better.

Craig took the place in front of the jukebox Paul indicated and bowed to the bar. He got a full round of applause and cat calls. I even led the cheer. Maybe Paul was going to be right. If this caught on, I would have so much business that I couldn't keep up. Imagine. Waiting lines to get into my bar. Maybe even enough to hire a cocktail waitress.

Paul held up his hands. "All right everyone. I'm the Jukebox Man and I need silence for this first flight into memory."

"You need your head examined," someone in the back shouted. Again the bar broke into laughter. More clicks as bar glasses hit the tables. Three people held up their hands at me for more rounds of drinks. Hot damn. Paul just might be right. I started working on the drinks as everyone quieted down.

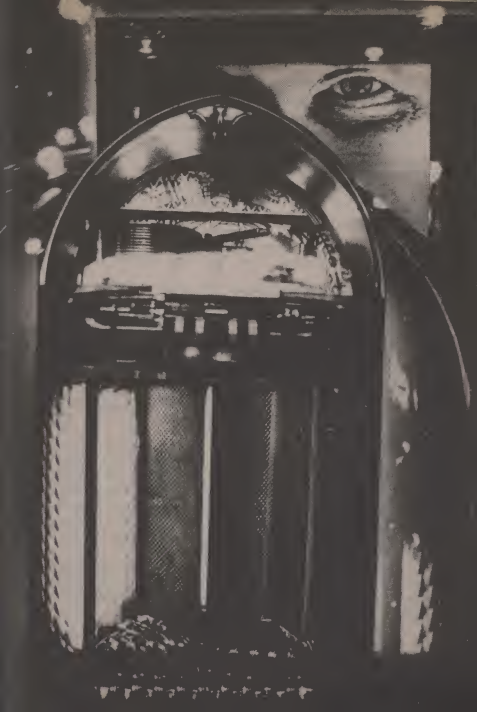
"Okay," Paul said to Craig, but loud enough for everyone in the place to hear. "It only works if you put your quarter in and then, as the record is being brought up, say out loud what the song reminds you of. Then close your eyes and think about the memory. You got that?"

"Will I be tested over all this later?" Craig asked.

"I didn't think you could write," Owen said from the front booth.

"He can't, but he's great at braille," Cynthia shouted.

It took a good five minutes for the place to calm down after



that exchange and all the wise cracks that followed. I got the drinks out during the laughter and the mock fight between Craig and Paul and took three more tables full of orders. If this kept up, the Jukebox Man was going to drink on the house for a long time.

"Ready?" Paul asked Craig.

He nodded and held his quarter high over his head.

"You ready?" Paul turned and asked me.

"Surprise them," I said and gave Paul a mock salute. There was no doubt that if the jukebox worked like it had Wednesday, everyone in the bar was in for one great big shock.

Friday: Eight P.M.

"All right. Who's going to be first?" the Jukebox Man asked the bar.

The silence made me nervous. My name is Radley Stout. I own Fontaine's Lounge. I don't like silence in my place. Silence makes me think of no business and I'm not doing that far above break-even to like that thought.

The Jukebox Man is Paul Turner of Turner's Electric. He was here last week to put in a electrical box for my new sign. He spotted the old jukebox sitting back there in the back hall covered with a sheet. He offered to get it running in exchange for a few drinks. I had nothing to lose. It couldn't be any worse than the radio I was using.

I think he fixed it too good.

Looks like fifteen, maybe twenty people are here to try the jukebox. Hell, that's just about all my regular customers. Paul promised he'd spread the word and I told a few people the last couple of days. He said if the thing worked for everyone like it had for us, I would have more customers than I would know what to do with. Fat chance, I'd just like maybe ten more regulars. That would be enough to make a good living. It would be a hell of a lot better than I'm doing now.

"Come on, someone," Paul said. "It's only a song. Right?"

No one moved. The tension was so thick, it held the smoke up against the ceiling. Paul better do something damn fast. These people were going to leave.

"How about you, Owen?" Paul said as he stepped toward the first booth. "I saw you looking at the song list. You got an old favorite on there?"

"Sure, but I don't believe any hogwash about—"

"It's only a memory," Paul said as he grabbed Owen by the arm and pulled him up out of the booth and toward the jukebox. "You got a quarter?"

Owen fumbled through his pockets and then shook his head.

"Radley. Throw me a quarter," Paul said as he turned Owen around to face the bar.

I flipped him a quarter and he handed it to Owen with a bow. "Your ticket to a fond memory."

"More like a ticket to the funny farm," Owen said. "If this is some dumb practical joke, I'll—"

"Who? Me?" Paul put his hands up pretending shock. "Radley, tell the man that it works."

"Like a charm," I said. "Give it a try, Owen, and I'll buy you the next drink. Deal?"

"Hell. Owen would sell his mother for a drink," old man MacInnes said from his favorite stool down at the end of the bar.

Everyone laughed and the tension eased.

"In fact," I said, "everyone who tries the jukebox tonight gets a free drink."

That might cost me a little, but if Paul was right and they all told their friends, I'd have this place packed in no time. Then maybe the bank would get off my back. Besides, the damn thing did work. It took me back to Jenny. The best memory I have. I was really there again. I touched her, yet I knew it was just a memory. Her skin was so soft. And her lips tasted of cherry lipstick, like they used to. I just wish I would have asked her to marry me that night. Oh well. Spilled milk and all that.

"Give me another drink before Owen leaves us," MacInnes said.

I made him and three others drinks as Paul told Owen what he needed to do. Finally, everyone was ready.

"There should be a drum roll," Owen said as he reached to put his quarter in the slot.

Someone started to bang their glass on the table and everyone joined in.

Owen dropped the quarter down the slot and got a cheer. Paul quickly held up his hands for quiet. "Say what you want the record to remind you of. Quick, before it starts."

Owen looked over at Paul, then at me. He looked a little worried. I nodded.

"This record reminds me of the night I got kicked out of college. It was one great party." He smiled and everyone in the bar

clapped and laughed.

Then the record started.

"Think about the memory," Paul whispered to him.

Owen got this faraway look in his eyes, kind of glazed over. Silence filled the bar again and the tension flooded back in like a pipe had broke and was filling the room with it.

The words of the song started and Owen disappeared.

Bingo.

Just plain and simple. One second he was there. Next second he wasn't.

Patty, Jim's wife, let out a slight scream and three of the men stood. "It's all right, folks," Paul said. "He'll be back as soon as the song stops. He's just reliving one of his memories. A great party from the sounds of it."

Everyone tried to talk at once, almost to the point that you couldn't hear the song. Three people downed their drinks and called for more. This was going to be a good night after all. Plus, Owen was sure to need more than just his free drink when he got back. Assuming, that is, he didn't come back too drunk from his party.

Friday: Eight P.M.

"All right. Who's going to be first?" the Jukebox Man asked the five people sitting at the bar and the three people in the front booth.

Nothing but silence. It would have been real noisy if you could hear their heads shaking. I was used to silence in this place. Business was so bad, if this thing with Paul and the jukebox didn't bring in new customers, I was going to shut the bar down. Back to selling cars for me. One dream down the tubes.

"I'll buy anyone who wants to try the jukebox a drink," I said. "The damn thing really works. You got to try it to believe it."

"Tell us what you think it does again," MacInnes said from his favorite stool down at the end of the bar.

"It takes you back to your memory," Paul said. Paul was the Jukebox Man. At least that's what he called himself.

"All songs do that," MacInnes said. "What's so damn special—"

"Hell, I don't know," Paul said, and indicated to me that he would like another drink. "I didn't invent it. I just fixed it. All I know is that when you put a quarter in it, it takes you back and you relive the memory that the song has for you. It takes you physically back."

I slid the drink in front of him. He nodded thanks, stirred it and took a quick sip. "For me, I went back to the night I carried the winning touchdown for State. You remember that, Radley. You were just a year behind me."

I nodded and he went on. "The song I punched up was playing that night while Susy and I were sitting out by the lake. I was feeling really good about everything and the song was playing and the next thing I knew, I had asked Susy to marry me." He shook his head and took a long drink. "I sure wanted to play pro ball. Kind of funny that I would get married instead. Anyway, you feel like you're really there. It's just fantastic. Right, Radley?"

"It's something all right," I said. "Took me back to an old girlfriend I wanted to marry, but didn't. Paul's right. It just pops you right out and takes you there. Who knows how the hell it works. It just does."

I looked up and down the bar. No one was making any great move to volunteer. I wanted to see Jenny again, but didn't want to leave the bar unattended.

"What happens if you don't come back?" MacInnes asked.

"Hell, man!" Paul said, slapping his palm against the bar. "It's only a memory. How can you not come back from a memory?"

"Maybe by changing it?" MacInnes said.

I looked at old man MacInnes. He was sitting there looking worried and there were enough alarm bells going off in my head for a seven alarm fire. What happened if someone didn't come back? What happened if I went back and asked Jenny to marry me? That would change my memory and my life. No one would know I was supposed to be here.

Paul downed his drink and slid off his bar stool. "Hell, I'll show you."

"Hang on a minute there, Paul," I said. "Maybe MacInnes has a point. What happens if—"

"Radley, you did it Wednesday. You know what it's like." Paul dropped a quarter into the jukebox and punched two buttons. "I'll be back in two minutes."

The song started and a glazed look came over his eyes.

Everything in my head yelled, "Stop him!" If he changed something—if he didn't marry Susy—he'd be playing pro ball and not be here.

I started around the end of the bar to pull the plug on the jukebox, but it was too late. The words of the song started and

Paul disappeared.

Three people gasped and old man MacInnes said, "I'll be damned."

I headed back up the bar toward the well to pour myself a drink. "I just hope you're wrong," I said to MacInnes.

"We won't know either way," MacInnes said.

I made the drink a double.

Friday: Eight P.M.

Only three customers came in on my last night. And they left early. Down with a whimper. It was fun while it lasted. Monday, the bank forecloses and I'm back at the car lot. I guess I should be happy Fred let me have my old job back. I should have married Jenny. She wouldn't have let me get into this mess in the first place.

One last check through the old Fontaine. Need to make sure the liquor cabinets are locked. I wonder what's going to happen to the place. Sure wish I could have figured something out to make a go of it. They say you need a gimmick. Something to bring them in. Just hanging your open sign out isn't enough now-a-days. Too damn bad. I'd have made a good bar owner. Just couldn't find the customers.

Front door is locked. Good. Lights off in the entry. Old sign off. Maybe a new sign would have helped. Never know now.

I'm going to miss this place, even though it always smelled like smoke.

Lights off in the main room. Beer signs off. Cabinets locked. Goodbye dream.

The back hall was always such a mess. Too bad I never got around to cleaning it up. That old jukebox would have been fun to restore. Maybe I could come in tomorrow and sneak the jukebox out without the bank knowing. Might be able to fix it. Give me something to do at nights. I've got more than enough room in the basement. They'd never miss an old beat-up thing like that.

Light off in the back hallway. Back door locked. It's just too bad no one liked the place. I would have made a good bar owner.

The Prize

by THOMAS WYLDE

They always tell kids
not to play in the streets.
But what Andy did on the streets
could hardly be called playing.

The boy ran hard in the evening rain, loving it. The city streets were dark and slippery, flashed to violet in bursts of lightning, empty streets echoing with thunder. He tightly gripped the plastic bag containing the marvelous prizes he'd dug out of the garbage—some burnt potato peelings, a third of a can of moldy baked beans, and best of all: five baby carrots right out of the ground.

He stumbled, grinning, his boots smacking the wet sidewalk. Then, from somewhere up the street, came a scream. He slowed to a trot, looking back, then ducked into an alcove. His lungs felt hot, and his spit tasted sour. He waited for his heart to slow, and for the ache in his side to go away. The scream came again, closer.

Lightning reflected suddenly in the empty window glass high above the street. Thunder sounded, and immediately it began to rain harder, filling the dark street with steaming spray. The wind whipped around and blew rain into his face.

The boy shivered, then tried the door behind him. Long ago heavy glass had filled the frame, but now there was only a flimsy sheet of peeling plywood, which local gangs had chalked and spray-painted with slogans and initials.

The door creaked inward, hung up momentarily on the sill, then gave way, scraping on the floor as the boy swung it wide. He tensed, ready to run, and waited for a flash to light up the interior. When it came he saw he wasn't alone.

There was a whiskered old man inside, leaned up against the

wall, head turned toward him, his eyes wet and bright. And there was something cradled in his arms, twin points reflecting the brief light. Eyes?

The boy hesitated, his pupils slowly opening to the darkness. Then he heard a clatter in the street, and the unmistakable clumping of boots. Five or six persons, moving ragged, talking loud, not scared at all—big boys—thumping the walls with hunks of steel. He ducked into the foyer and pushed the door shut.

He pulled his hunting knife and wedged the blade under the door, then kicked it once with the toe of his boot. The old man in the foyer kept quiet without being told.

The clumping footsteps, the shouts, the banging metal, all drew close. The door gonged loudly, and boots crunched on glass just outside, loitering. The door banged again, and the knife blade scraped on the floor half an inch. Another heavy thump, but the blade bit into the aluminum threshold, and the door held tight. Somebody out there swore happily, then the gang moved on, pounding the doors beyond.

The boy listened as the noises diminished into the hiss of rain on the street, disappearing into the intermittent rattle of water blown against the plywood.

He turned in the darkness. He was still an hour's run from home, and unless his older brother had come up with something—which was fat chance—they'd be counting on him to bring home dinner. He wanted to hit the road right away, but with that gang in the area it would be safer to wait a few minutes—unless the old man had ideas. Some of the old men still had ideas.

The boy stepped along the wall toward the man. There was almost total darkness in the hallway, but he could hear the guy breathing.

He backed up across the hallway to a place opposite and slid to the cool tile floor, his back against the wall. He said, "I got a candle. Wanna see?"

He thumbed his ancient Zippo and lit a short red candle, then reached across and planted the candle on the floor in a puddle of drippings. The old man watched; the boy leaned back. He had placed the candle where he could easily kick it over if the gang came back, or if the old man tried to jump him.

"My name is Andy."

The old man remained silent. Something moved in his arms, and for the first time the boy saw the cat. It was scrawny, old and

grey; a tiger-striped cat. It suffered the old man's rhythmic stroke and gazed without interest across the hallway at Andy. Candlelight burned in the cat's yellow eyes. It was only the third cat the boy had ever seen.

Beside the man was a dirty bedroll and a small vinyl bag with slack sides. The bag might even have been empty. Maybe he wants to fill it with the food I've found, thought Andy. Or with my hunting knife.

He didn't feel right with his knife jammed under the edge of the door, but he couldn't get it back without giving the door a good hard kick, and it wouldn't be safe to do that until he was sure the gang was far away.

The candlelight flickered over the man, and the boy realized one of the old guy's hands was jammed up under his ragged coat. What did he have in there?

"They might come back," said Andy. "Do you got a gun?"

The old man shook his head, then he smiled, showing wet, oozing gums and no teeth. "What I got they'd want?"

Good question. "So what's that in your coat?"

The old man shrugged. "Nothing." But he kept his hand in there just the same. He was staring at Andy's plastic bag.

"Hungry?"

"Not today," the old man said, closing his eyes.

"My people is starving," said Andy.

"Ain't my fault," the old man said, tensing. "Don't care what they told you."

"Did I say nothing?"

Lightning flickered in the corner of his eye. Thunder followed in one second, shaking the walls. The storm center was almost right above them. It gave Andy an idea.

"How old are you," asked the old man.

"How old are you?"

The smile, red and black. "Forty-eight."

Andy watched the bulge of the old man's coat. What's he got in there? Better to keep him busy, keep him talking. "Me, I'm nine and a half."

The smile again, accompanied by lightning—thunder coming almost immediately. Andy flinched, then made himself relax. "Lots a rain, huh?"

The old man tilted his head back, as if to observe the rain hitting the roof through ten stories of abandoned offices.

"Times will get better. You'll see."

"Sure, dude."

"We'll get it all back, just the way it was."

The candle flickered in the drafty hallway, throwing shadows on the old man's ruined face. He seemed to chew on the tasty image of things getting better. Andy hated the old folks and their stupid stories about the way it had been—bright cities jammed with people, stores full of food and toys and all the electric junk they seemed to like so much. In the old days, everybody was all the time running off to jobs or to schools or cruising to movies or bars. A paradise on earth, to hear them tell it. Andy was sick to death of all that crap. What was the point?

The old man looked across at him. "God, I remember . . ."

Andy slipped the nine-millimeter automatic out of his jacket and pointed it at the old man. "Show me what you got."

The old man's hand jerked an inch from the coat and stopped. "Where?" he said, his eyes wide.

Andy motioned with the gun.

"You can't fire that now," the old man said. "They'll hear you. They'll come back."

"No they won't."

Lightning hissed and thunder crashed, impossibly loud.

"They'll hear that," said Andy.

The old man blinked his wet eyes and pulled something out of his coat. Andy smiled. It was a hard piece of French bread, the kind you need strong teeth to eat. The old guy had probably been carrying it for days, trying to figure out what to do with it.

"It's all I got in the world," he said.

"Toss it here," said Andy.

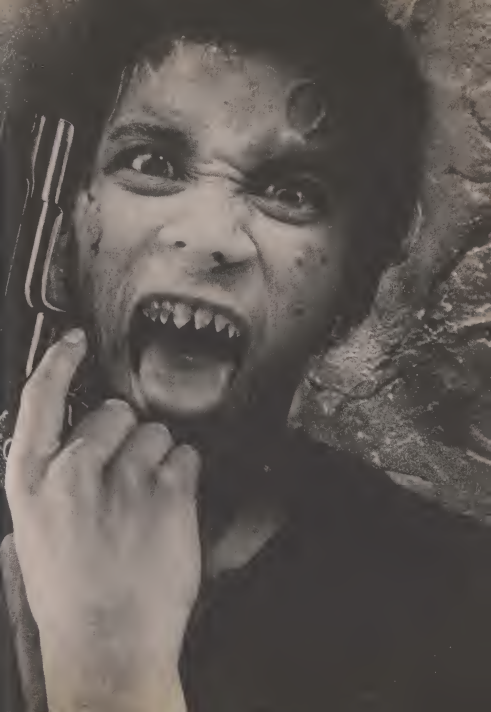
He did, looking sad. Andy let the bread hit the wall behind him and bounce on the floor, where it nearly knocked over the red candle. The cat sat up and looked at it.

"We're hungry too," said the old man.

"Let me fix that," said Andy, just as lightning struck. Hidden behind the walls of thunder he shot the cat right between the whiskers.

"I'm back!" said Andy, crawling into the shack through the secret door. His mother nodded over the pungent hash pipe, staring past him.

"What'd you get?" asked his brother, blearily grabbing the plastic bag away from him.



Potato peelings, baby carrots, a third of a can of baked beans, and—his prize—the scrawny carcass of an old grey cat. Fresh meat.

His mother came to life, eyes glowing. She and his brother cleaned the cat and cooked it in the crackling fire. They gave him a tiny dollop of stringy burnt meat, then swatted him away while they ate.

It was okay; Andy was too sleepy to argue. He counted out his ammunition, then lined the bullets up on the dirt floor and marched them around like squat little robots. He was thinking about tomorrow, about what he might do.

Maybe take a run up Deadman's Canyon and look for stockpiles the survivalists had hidden. Or go down by the river shacks and see what the Rippers were doing. Or cruise out to one of his secret places in the ruins of the harbor, maybe shoot a big old water rat.

The tiny robots danced in the dirt, gleaming in the firelight. Andy lowered his head and looked down the rows, getting just the right angle.

He yawned and dreamed about tomorrow. Old folks were crazy. There were always plenty of neat things to do, lots of spooky places to go, tons of weird stuff for Andy to check out. Why would he ever want to have it back the way it was?

After a while he gathered up his bullets, poked them back into the magazine, and slid it into the nine-millimeter. He yawned again, then carefully wrapped his pistol in the special oily rag and put it away. His mother and brother squatted in a dark corner, fighting over the last of the smoking meat. Andy smiled secretly. Okay.

Let them have the stupid cat. He still had the old man.

LITTLE DOORS

by PAUL DI FILIPPO

Why did the queer title of
the old children's book
strike him so deeply?

Once upon a time . . . began the story Jerome Crawleigh was trying to read but couldn't.

Squeezing crocodile tears out from his eyelids' tender embrace, Crawleigh pinched the bridge of his fine Roman nose. Good God, was there no end to the books to be devoured and digested before he could begin to write his own latest? And his field—children's literature—was comparatively empty. What if he had chosen some other, older byway of literature, more crowded with primary texts and execrable exegesis? Wouldn't that have been just dandy?

Ah, exegesis—such a resounding, academic word. When in doubt, explicate. Extricate yourself from words with more words, analogous to some hair of the dog on the morning after. Something of a self-perpetuating cycle. But what the hell, give it a go. Perhaps penetrate the thicket of cliché that hid the elusive hare of fairy-tale truth . . .

Once: not twice or thrice, but once. Singular, not-to-be-duplicated experience. Yet by implication, if unique wonders happened once, others might again.

Upon: what other preposition would do so well here? During, in, on? Definitely not! We need the connotation of "in the course of," indicating simultaneous progression and fixity in a particular milieu.

A: here, a neat touch of vagueness and remoteness. Not "the" time (as of a certain king, perhaps), but "a" time, nebulous and mistily distant.

Time: ah, yes, the most loaded word in the language. Not its counterpart, space, an intuitively graspable dimension, but time, breeder of paradox, reiver of hopes and loves. If the tale to be told were merely distant in space, how easily discounted or disproved. But "dis-placed" in time, what power it gains!

So—

Once upon a time . . .

But Crawleigh's professorial spell, although woven by a past master, was not strong enough to get beyond this initial obstacle. Something was wrong with his brain today. Dropping the offending book upon his littered desktop, where it snapped shut with a dusty clap, he pushed blunt fingers through curly greying hair, as if to palpitate the reluctant organ. Was it the spring sunlight insinuating its invitation to be lax through the tall window of his office that had unordered his thoughts? Was it the office itself that was to blame? Dark wood moldings waxed by generations of janitors; shelf upon shelf of accusatory books, their spines stiff as soldiers'; yellowing framed diplomas on cracked plaster walls, constricting his life as surely as if the frames had been dropped like hoops over his head and around his arms.

Possibly. Quite possibly the office was at fault. He ought to get out. But where would he go? Not home. No, definitely not home. Upon his unexpected arrival, there would be unpleasant questions aplenty from Connie to greet him. He would face her usual endless prying into his affairs, her tirades about his meager pay and her lack of status among other University wives. Not the faculty lounge either. At the moment, the company of his fellow pedants was least attractive to him.

Suddenly he thought of Audrey. How many days *had* it been since his last tryst with audacious Audrey, queen of the copiers, Zenobia of the xerox shop? Just the tonic for his blues, just the girl he'd hate to lose. Audrey it was.

Crawleigh emerged from behind his desk, moved to the coatrack and snatched his modified safari jacket from its hook. With his desert boots and cords and jacket, he thought he looked rather rakish, explorer of an intellectual terrain.

And besides, he felt more comfortable with Audrey, dressed so.

Crawleigh left his office behind.

Out on the quad, under the elms, Crawleigh began almost immediately to feel better. Seeing the students idling in the young

shade of the newly leafed trees recalled his own youth to him, reminding him of a time when he had had dreams and hopes and desires similar to theirs.

And were such things gone now entirely from his life? he wondered as he traced a diagonal across the grassy square. Or had the simple wants and plans of his youth merely been transmuted into mature shapes? Was loss involved, or only metamorphosis?

Crawleigh tried to put by such ponderous puzzles. He was in search of forgetfulness right now, not answers. The anodyne of Audrey was augury enough.

As Crawleigh approached the big arch that framed one entrance to the campus, his gaze was attracted by a bright dab of colors down by the ground, at the foot of the marble gateway. Intrigued, he stopped to investigate.

My, my, the art students had been busy with their guerrilla activities again. Not content with formal galleries, they had recently taken to creating public displays that would ostensibly reach more people.

This piece seemed more whimsical than strident.

Painted on the marble surface of the arch was tiny *trompe l'oeil*. Starting at groundlevel, a flight of stairs led up to a little door. The golden knob and black hinges were rendered in minute detail. The whole thing looked quite convincingly like an entrance into the solid marble structure. But the only creature that could have used such a door would have been small as a mouse.

And in fact—why, yes, there were words below the painting that said—so discerned Crawleigh while bending down without regard for propriety—"The Mouse Collective."

Straightening up, Crawleigh found himself smiling. His fancy was tickled. As students' conceptions went, this wasn't too sophomoric.

Moving under and beyond the arch, out onto the public street, Crawleigh kept his eyes open for further works by the Mouse Collective, and was not disappointed.

A painted ladder ran up a retaining wall and into a drainpipe.

A curtained window big as a playing card mimicked the human-sized one set beside it.

Small steps made of wood were nailed in a spiral on a tree. Up in the branches, Crawleigh thought to detect a tiny treehouse.

At the base of a stop sign was painted a mouse-sized traffic light, glowing perpetually green.

A nail-studded, wood-grained, rusty-ringed trap door was illusioned into the sidewalk.

After noting these fanciful brainchildren of the Mouse Collective, Crawleigh began to grow bored with the project. As usual, no one knew when to stop. Just because once was clever, twice was not twice as clever. Crawleigh ceased looking for the little paintings, and in fact soon forgot about them.

In a couple of minutes he came to the Street, which cut perpendicularly across his path. Traffic was thick today, car horns blaring as drivers jostled for parking spaces.

The Street was the commercial heart of the town's university district. Here, around the university bookstore, dozens of business had gathered over the decades. A drycleaner's, a liquor store, two ice-creameries, clothing stores, shoe stores, a Store 24, an Army-Navy Surplus outlet, jewelry and lingerie boutiques, several restaurants, a deli, a grocery, a hardware store, a toy store, a computer vendor—

—and, of course, those invaluable adjuncts to exploding and processing information, rival copy shops.

In one of which worked Audrey. Disarmingly simple, naive urchin, waif, and savior of overcivilized senses, thought Crawleigh. Be there today, when I need you.

Arriving at the door of the copy place, Crawleigh saw her through the window and let out an involuntary relieved sigh. Then he went in.

The interior of the shop was hot and noisy and smelled of obscure chemicals. Automatic feeders sucked in sheets to be copied faster than the eye could follow. Light blasted the images off them onto blanks, and copies and originals were spat out by the insatiable machines. Workers scurried to collate paper and placate the crowd of customers.

Audrey unwittingly presented her profile to Crawleigh. She was copying pages of a book. She left the copier lid up during the process, so that her form was bathed in a garish green light as each page was zapped, transforming her visage into something from another world.

She was small and skinny. Her tight blue-and-white-striped stovepipe pants revealed her legs to be without any excess flesh, from thigh to ankle. (How unlike cloyingly constant Connie's chubby calves!) She wore ankle-socks, white high-heels, and a simple pink short-sleeved shirt. Her black hair was teased on top and

short except where it feathered her neck.

Finishing the task at hand, she scooped up the copies from the out tray and turned toward the counter.

Her features were plain, perhaps sharp, but not homely: simply undistinguished by any great beauty or vitality. To compensate, she wore too much makeup. Dark eyeliner, glossy lipstick, lots of blush. A few stray arcs of hair cut across her forehead. She was twenty-two years old.

Crawleigh had never seen anyone so outlandishly attractive to him. That wasn't precisely right. (And we must have precision, mustn't we?) Audrey was so quintessentially like a thousand, thousand other young women her age that she affected Crawleigh like an archetype. When he made love to her, he felt he was tapping into the essence of a generation, pinning a symbol to the mattress.

Every litcrit's wetdream.

Crawleigh saw Audrey's face pass through three or four distinct emotions when she spotted him. Surprise, anger, interest, a determination to play the coquette. She was so *delightfully* transparent!

"Hello, Audrey," Crawleigh said.

As usual, she was chewing gum. Ringing up the sale, she snapped the elastic fodder deliberately, knowing he couldn't stand it.

"Oh, Professor Crawleigh. What a surprise. I thought you moved outta town or something. Haven't seen you in so long."

Crawleigh experienced the delightful thrill that came from bantering with double meanings, trying to maintain at least a surface of innocence, yet also trying to get across the rather salacious things he intended.

"Ah, well," Crawleigh replied, "you know how busy life becomes around midterms. I barely get to leave the department. And I just haven't needed your services till today."

"Izzat so?" Audrey studied her polished nails as if they contained infinite secrets. "Next!" she called out, and stuck out her hand for something to be copied. Receiving a loose page, she turned as if their conversation were over.

Crawleigh was not discouraged, having played this game before. "If I drop something off later this afternoon, will you attend to it personally? I need it quite desperately."

Audrey spoke back over her small shoulder. "Okay. But don't make it too late. I'm done at three."

"Wonderful," said Crawleigh, meaning it.

When Audrey smiled then, she was almost special-looking.

And when she stepped into Crawleigh's car at three, he was smiling too.

The book—if it was ever started, let alone finished—was going to be burdened with one of those weighty titles complete with colon that assured academic immortality.

The Last Innocents: Children's Fantastic Literature in America and Britain during the First Decade of the Twentieth Century.

The projected text that Crawleigh had in mind—the Platonic ideal that always outshone the reality—was going to concentrate on two authors of genius.

For the sake of glorious symmetry, one of the geniuses would be British and female, the other male and American.

The envelopes, please.

Edith Nesbit.

Lyman Frank Baum.

Through the carapace of Crawleigh's cynicism and jadedness, these names still sent a thrill along his nerves. Simply to hear or read them was to be propelled back in time to his youth, when, as a solitary sort of kid, he had hid on many a summer day in the midst of a grove of shielding lilacs, belly to the dirt, reading the fantasies of these two, who—he knew even then, as a ten-year-old surrounded by the insanity of a world orgasming in its second great war of the century—had been special voices from an era far, far away and utterly unreachable.

What was it about the first decade of this mad, bad century that made it so luminous and special in Crawleigh's mind? He was not fool enough to imagine that life then had been edenic, nor human nature other than its frequently rancid self. No, he knew the litany of facts as well as any other educated person. Child labor, endemic diseases running rampant, bigotry, hunger, outhouses, colonialism, jingoism, the Armenian genocide, illiteracy, hunger, poverty, fires that would decimate wooden cities, and of course, lurking just around the corner, The War to End Wars . . . Taken all in all, not an objectively pleasant time to live.

But if one tried to understand the era in the only way one could ever apprehend the past—through its art and artifacts—then one was forced to conclude that the decade had been possessed of a certain uninhibited innocence that had vanished forever from the globe.

The Wizard of Oz. The Five Children and It. Queen Zixi of Ix. The Story of the Amulet. The Magical Monarch of Mo. Gone, all gone, that unselfconsciously delightful writing. Current fantasy was produced mainly for adults, and the little bit Crawleigh had sampled was a botched, stereotyped, unmagical mess. And what of juvenile literature today? Full of drugs and pregnancies, child-abuse and death. Jesus, you could practically see each author panting to be hailed as the next Balzac of the training-bra set.

His book would illuminate this whole fallen condition, and the glory whence it had descended. The outline had him starting back with the Victorians for a running jump. Thackery, Lang, Stockton, MacDonald, certainly Carroll. Then land in the era of his main concern, and spend the largest portion of the book there. Perhaps with a digression on fantasy in early comics: Herriman's *Krazy Kat* and McCay's *Little Nemo*.

Yes, a fine ambition this book, and certain to be widely appreciated. The culmination of a life of reading.

If only he could just finish these last few texts.

Crawleigh had gotten through the book that had stumped him the other day. A minor work, but useful as one more citation. Now he was ready to read one last critical work that had just reached him.

The book was by a colleague of Crawleigh's whom he had often met at numerous literary conferences. Judd Mitchell. When he and Mitchell last talked, the other man had let slip a bit of his thesis, and Crawleigh had grown nervous, since it touched peripherally on Crawleigh's own. But now Mitchell's book was in hand, and a quick riffle through it had shown Crawleigh that it certainly didn't poach on his territory to any great extent.

Feeling quite relieved and even generous toward Mitchell for hewing to what was expected of him, Crawleigh settled back in his office chair to study the book at greater length.

A couple of hours passed. Crawleigh stopped only to light a stenchy pipe and discharge clouds of smoke. He found himself enjoying the book. Mitchell had a certain facileness with facts. Nothing like Crawleigh's own witty yet deep style, of course. Too bad about the man's personal life. Crawleigh had recently heard rumors that Mitchell had lit out for parts unknown, abandoning wife and family. Something about accumulated gambling debts coming to light.

Midway through the book, Crawleigh came upon a passage

that affected him like a pitchfork to the rear.

Perhaps one of the most curious books for children that has ever been written is the neglected *Little Doors*, by Alfred Bigelow Strayhorn. Published by the once-prestigious but now defunct firm of Drinkwater and Sons, in 1903, the story concerns the Alicelike adventures of a girl named Judy, who encounters a surprisingly mercenary cast of characters, including a Shylockian shark and a race-horse who escapes the glue-factory by gaining wings. Judy's encounter with Professor Mouse, who explains the theory of little doors, is particularly well-done. But the cumulative effect of the narrative is vastly more unsettling than the sum of its parts . . . of course, it is most fruitful to read the book as a sustained attack on capitalism and its wastage of human souls. . . .

Crawleigh abandoned Mitchell's book and puffed contemplatively on his pipe. Once one discounted Mitchell's inane socialism, the man seemed undeniably to have stumbled upon an exciting find. In Crawleigh's own extensive searches of the literature, he had never encountered the book cited by Mitchell. (And why did that queer title strike him so deeply?) Now he knew he had to track it down, though. If he failed to incorporate it into his study, everyone would soon be making unflattering comparisons between his book and Mitchell's, in terms of completeness.

To the library, then! Descend like the Visigoths on Rome! Pillage the stacks, burn the card-catalogue, smash the terminals, rape the librarians . . .

One shouldn't start thinking in such violent sexual imagery on a hot April afternoon, of course, unless one was quite prepared to act on it, Crawleigh reminded himself.

So up he got and went to seek Audrey's awesomely attractive and appreciated little arse.

Which now reared under the sweaty sheets like two little melons.

It was Audrey's lunch-hour. Crawleigh had cajoled her to come with him back to her apartment, which was not far from the Street.

Audrey lived in a single room with a kitchen alcove and bath and one window. The shade there was pulled down now, an ebony oblong framed by hot white light on top and two sides. The room was plunged into that peculiar deracinating artificial darkness that

could only be found when you shut out the sun in the middle of a bright day and retreated inside from the busy world with its bustling billions. Crawleigh felt simultaneously ancient and infantile. He was sated, yet not bored with life. On the other hand, he felt no immediate impulse to get up and get busy. Simply to lie here beside Audrey was his sole ambition for the moment.

Crawleigh rested on his back; Audrey on her belly. Turning his gaze on his little nymph, Crawleigh saw that Audrey's arms formed a cage around her head, while her face was buried in the sheets.

This was most unlike Audrey. Usually after sex she was quite talkative, regaling him with really amazingly funny anecdotes about her daily travails and accomplishments. It was astounding how much drama she could extract from such trivial situations, and Crawleigh always listened with gleeful indulgence.

Something must be wrong now. Crawleigh experienced a mortal shiver as he considered the possibility that perhaps his performance had been below par.

Crawleigh laid a hand on her sheet-covered rump and squeezed with what he hoped was proper affection.

"Was it all right today, dear? I really enjoyed it."

Audrey's mattress-muffled voice drifted up. "Yeah. I came."

Crawleigh grew slightly miffed at her easy vulgarity. Such talk was fine during the act itself, but afterward things should be, well, more romantic. Connie, for all her other faults, was never so coarse.

"For heaven's sake, then, why the sulking? You'd think I just tortured you."

Audrey whirled around and pushed up, coming to rest on her haunches, looking down on naked Crawleigh with the twisted sheet pooling around her thin waist. Her little pink-tipped breasts reminded Crawleigh of apples in the demi-dusk. Her face was really angry.

"It is torture!" she cried. "Mental torture. I really like you, Jerry, but I can only see you whenever you have a lousy minute to spare. And when we're together, we never leave this stinking room. There's more to life than sex, you know. When are we gonna go someplace exciting, do something different? I gotta come back to this room every day after work as it is, without spending lunchtime here too!"

Crawleigh was unprepared for the vehemence of this outburst.

He had had no sense of mistreating Audrey, and was taken aback by her accusations.

All he could think to say was, "You must have had an awful day at work to get so upset, dear."

"So what if I did?" Audrey shot back. "I always have an awful day at that place. You know what it's like—people shouting and insulting you, standing over those hot stinking machines for eight hours, making twenty-five cents over minimum wage—I hate it! I really hate it! Do you think that's what I wanna do with the rest of my life?"

Crawleigh had never given the matter any thought at all, and so was quite unprepared to answer. Trying to divert the argument back to safer ground, Crawleigh said, "Well, perhaps I have been neglecting to give you the proper, ah, stimulation. But you must realize, dear, that it is not easy for us to be together. You know how small this town is. Everyone knows everyone else. If we were to go places together, my wife would soon learn. And then where would we be?"

"Why don't you ditch that old cow?" Audrey demanded.

Crawleigh smiled as the mental image of Connie as a cow in a dress was conjured up. "It's not so easy as all that, Audrey. You're an adult. Surely you know how such things work. We must give it time. Listen, I have an idea. The very next out-of-state conference I have to go to, you'll come along."

For a moment Audrey seemed mollified. But then, without warning, she threw herself down on Crawleigh and began to weep. Crawleigh wrapped his arms around her shaking body. Her skin felt like a handful of rose petals.

"Oh, I'm so ordinary," Audrey wailed. "I'm so plain and ordinary that no one could love me."

Patting her, Crawleigh said, "That's not true. You're my princess. My princess."

Audrey seemed not to hear.

O, frabjous day, they'd found the book! Crawleigh stood in the English Department offices. He had just opened the little door on his mailbox and withdrawn a slip that reported on his request for the volume mentioned by Mitchell. After failing to locate it in any of the university's collections, he had initiated the search of associated facilities. And wouldn't you know it, his fabulous luck was holding, it was

available right here in sleepy old College Town, at a private library Crawleigh had often passed but never visited. It would be delivered by a campus courier later that day.

Crawleigh could barely contain his excitement when he returned to his office. Why, he even felt charitable toward Connie, who that morning had unexpectedly gone to the trouble of rousing herself from bed before eleven and sharing breakfast with him.

To pass the time until the courier arrived, Crawleigh idly picked up one his favorite novels not written by The Illustrious Pair. *Look Homeward, Angel*, set in the period Crawleigh worshipped, had always struck him as somehow akin to fantasy, concerned as it was with the mysteries of Time and Space.

Crawleigh flipped open the book to the famous preface.

... a stone, a leaf, an unfound door ... the unspeakable and incommunicable prison of this earth ... the lost lane-end into heaven ...

The words filled him as always with profound melancholy, and he became so lost in the book that hours passed. When a knock sounded at the office door, he emerged reluctantly from the text.

The courier demanded a signature for his package, and Crawleigh complied. Taking the plainly wrapped parcel with trembling hands, Crawleigh shut the door on the messenger and the world.

Peeling off the old-fashioned brown paper and twine, Crawleigh settled down to look at this obscure book, whose title had so profoundly affected him.

The book was hardcover, about twelve by ten inches, and fairly thin. Its cover was the kind simply not made any more: the burgundy cloth framed an inset colored plate. The plate depicted a curious scene.

Stretching away to a horizon line was an arid, stony plain. Standing in the foreground of the picture was a door and its frame, unattached to any building. Its knob was gold, its hinges black, and it was open. Within this door was an identical one, but smaller. Within the second, a third, within the third, a fourth, within the fourth ...

Crawleigh couldn't count the painted doors past twenty. There was a small pinprick of green in the very center of the stacked doors, as if the very last portal, however far away and miniscule,

opened onto another, more verdant world.

The title was not given on the cover.

Intrigued, Crawleigh opened the book. Inside, beneath the copyright information, was the colophon of the publishers, Drinkwater and Sons: an eccentric house with gables, turrets, chimneys and at least a dozen doors in it on all levels.

Here at last, on the facing page, was title and author:

LITTLE DOORS
by
Alfred Bigelow Strayhorn

Crawleigh flipped to page one and began to read.

Once upon a time . . . began the story Princess Ordinary was trying to read but couldn't.

Odd opening, thought Crawleigh. He had expected to be introduced right away to the heroine mentioned by Judd Mitchell, named Judy. Oh well, auctorial intentions were not always immediately fathomable, even (especially?) in children's literature. On with the story.

Princess Ordinary finally gave up and tossed the book of fairy tales down with pettish sigh.

"Drat it all!" she exclaimed, and kicked her satin hassock with her pretty little velvet-shod foot. "Why can't I enter these old tales as if they were my own dreams, as I once did when I was a child? Surely one doesn't lose talents as one grows older, but only gains new skills, moving on from strength to strength. At least that's the way things should be." The princess paused for a moment. "At least they should be that way for princesses, who are special, even if they're as ordinary and drab as I fear I am."

The Princess stood up then, and moved to a wood-framed mirror that stood across the room from her. (The Princess was to be found this morning in her luxurious bedroom, for that was where she liked best to read, and lately she had taken to staying in the one room almost all day.)

At the mirror, she pirouetted with rather more abandon than she felt, holding out her full skirts with one hand to add a little extra graceful touch she had seen her mother employ at royal dances. But in spite of all her airs, Princess Ordinary was forced to admit that the reflection that greeted her gaze was that of a young woman whom no one would ever call



beautiful. Her hair was an awful coal-black—everyone in this kingdom thought only golden hair was to be admired—and her nose and chin were sharp in a way that betokened a certain sullenness. No, the Princess was just what her name implied: a common sort of girl who, except for the accident of her royal birth, might have just as easily been found waiting on customers in a shop; which of course is not to say that she hadn't a good heart and soul that were to be cherished as much as those of a real beauty, but only that they could not be so easily inferred from her appearance.

Princess Ordinary spun the mirror—which was mounted in a frame on pins through its middle—so that the glass faced to the wall. Now, curiously enough, the wood used for this mirror had once been a door (there was a shortage of lumber at the time) and it still retained its handle on the backside. Seeing the silly handle to a door that could never be opened, the Princess laughed, but only for a moment. She was soon sober again.

"Not only am I ordinary," she cried in a fit of pique, "but the whole world is quite unimaginative and boring! There isn't a single thing in it that interests me any more, and I wish I could leave it all behind!"

At that exact moment, the Princess's tutor appeared in the door. He had come looking for her for her daily lesson (for the Princess wasn't so old that she had quit learning, nor should any of us ever be), and when he heard the Princess's wish, he was moved to let out a blast of steam.

The tutor, you see, was a mechanical man named Steel Daniel, and had been constructed especially to be Princess Ordinary's companion. Consequently, he had great affection for her and did not like to see her upset.

"Is that really what you desire, Princess?" asked Steel Daniel. "To visit another world where things are perhaps more to your liking, but definitely not as they are here?"

"Yes," said the Princess, stamping her foot (the one that had not kicked the hassock, for that one was a trifle sore). "Any world must be better than this one. I'll go anywhere that extends a welcome."

The Princess did not stop to think about how she would be leaving her mother and father and Steel Daniel behind, and truth to tell, she didn't precisely care just then.

"Well, in that case," said Daniel, "I have no choice but to obey your commands. I will tell you who you must visit to satisfy your wish. It is Professor Mouse, who lives far away, over much treacherous terrain. You must journey to him on foot, disguised as a commoner, and no one can help you. The only aids I can proffer are these."

Steel Daniel opened a little door in his chest and took out a magic stone and a magic leaf. Princess Ordinary took them, and, before you could say tara-cum-diddle, she was clothed like a peasant girl and marching down

the path leading from the castle gate, without so much as a fare-thee-well . . .

Perplexed, Crawleigh shut the book. Where were the characters itemized by Mitchell? Except for Professor Mouse, they were nonexistent. Had Mitchell gone over the edge at the end, beset as he was with personal troubles? Did Crawleigh even have the same book?

Whatever the explanation, Crawleigh would have to proceed as if this were the text to be dissected. What else could he do? He would take Xeroxes (Audrey's job, that), and use them to refute anyone who sided with Mitchell's version of the book.

But for now, he had had enough of *Little Doors*. The reading had left him with an unexplainable headache, and he resolved to go home for the day.

When Crawleigh arrived to pick up Audrey, he found her still packing.

The shade was up today, letting Saturday sunlight spill in, and Crawleigh found the room foreign-looking. Audrey was frantically rummaging through her dresser and closet, tossing clothes into an open suitcase. Her cheap turntable was spinning, and loud music filled the air.

"Oh, Jerry," she cried when he let himself in after knocking. "What am I gonna pack? What kind of restaurants will we be going to? What kind of people am I gonna meet? Oh, Christ, why didn't I buy that goddamn dress I saw on sale last week?"

Crawleigh refrained from telling Audrey that she wouldn't be meeting any of his colleagues if he could help it. The MLA conference—held in San Francisco this year—was just the place where news of his perfidies would disseminate the fastest. Audrey would have to stay in the hotel room until he was free to be with her, or otherwise amuse herself inconspicuously during the day.

But time enough to tell her this when they were on the plane.

"Listen, dear, just take what you consider to be most stylish, and I'm sure you'll look fine. We don't have much time, you realize, if we're going to make our flight."

Audrey frantically stuffed loose shirt-tails and sleeves and legs into the battered suitcase. "Jesus, I'm gonna forget something important, I just know it."

While Audrey finished, Crawleigh moved idly about the room, still bemused by how strange it looked to him today. He picked

up the empty cardboard record-sleeve lying by the turntable and studied it. It was good to know a few names in the rock-and-roll world to drop in front of students, and Crawleigh relied on Audrey for this knowledge, in addition to the carnal variety.

This particular jacket showed a fuzzy closeup photo of a katydid, and said:

STEELY DAN
KATY LIED

As Crawleigh read the title, the singer's words leaped into sonic focus.

*A kingdom where the sky is burning,
A vision of the child returning.
Any world that I'm welcome to,
Any world that I'm welcome to,
Is better than the one I come from.*

A shiver ran down Crawleigh's spine with the velocity of chilled honey.

How in the hell—? What synchronicity could account for the close parallel of this song with Princess Ordinary's lament? Was it simply that these pop-prophets had somehow read the obscure book he was currently researching, or was it all coincidence, a mere common concatenation of certain sounds, simply a new linguistic shuffle bringing up the same sequence, after nearly a century?

Crawleigh probably would have let the mystery bother him if Audrey hadn't yelled loudly then, and begun to swear.

"Yow! Oh, Christ, I broke a frigging fingernail! Why the hell aren't you helping me, Jerry, if we're so late?"

Crawleigh hastened to Audrey's side and together they got the stuffed suitcase closed and locked.

Aboard the jet, Crawleigh tried a dozen times to find a way to tell Audrey of the peculiar conditions that bore on her accompanying him. But she was enjoying her first air-journey so much that he hadn't the heart right then.

In the middle of the flight, as their plane crossed a seemingly limitless desert, she turned a radiantly excited face toward him and said, "Oh, Jerry, this is all just like a dream. I feel like—I don't

know. Like the Princess in that book you let me read."

Crawleigh's stomach churned.

In the lobby of the hotel, he had a nervous fifteen minutes as they registered together, fearing that some acquaintance would surely see them. Crawleigh's luck held, however, and they got up to their room without being accosted.

Audrey threw herself down on the queen-size bed, bouncing and squealing.

"What a palace," she said. "This room's bigger'n my whole apartment."

"Glad you like it," Crawleigh said, fiddling nervously with the luggage where the bellhop had set it. "I picked it with you in mind."

With this as an opening, he plunged ahead and told her.

Crawleigh had always thought that "crestfallen" was just a word. But when Audrey's face underwent the transformation he witnessed and her whole body seemed to cave in on itself, he knew the reality behind the word.

For a minute, Audrey sat as if devoid of breath or spirit. Then she shot to her feet and faced Crawleigh quivering with rage.

"You—you fucking liar!"

She pushed past Crawleigh, elbowing him in the gut and raced out the door.

Crawleigh sat on the bed, an arm across his sore stomach. His free hand—behind him for support—felt that the cover was still warm from Audrey.

Well, this was not turning out as he had planned. But perhaps he could still salvage the star-crossed seminar somehow. Audrey had to return. He held the plane tickets and all the money. And when she did, he would have an eloquent speech ready that would soothe her ruffled feathers and have her falling all over him.

When Crawleigh's midriff felt normal, he got up and unpacked his bag. Lying on top was *Little Doors*. He had hoped to get some work done amid everything else this trip, and he had still not finished the book.

After pacing anxiously a bit, Crawleigh determined to read to pass the time until Audrey came back. He settled down in a chair.

When the Crow approached Princess Ordinary, she was nearly dying of hunger.

The Crow, fully as big as a human, alighted beside the famished Princess in the midst of the desert she was then traversing. His appearance

was quite frightening, and Princess Ordinary wished she still had either the magic stone or the magic leaf to protect herself with. But the stone had been used up saving her from the Jelly-Dragons, and the leaf had crumbled up after expanding into a flying carpet and carrying her over the Unutterable. Consequently, lacking either of these two tokens, she had to hope that the Crow possessed a nature belied by his exterior.

"Oh, help me, please, good Crow," cried out the Princess. "I am dying in this wasteland, and will surely end my days here unless you come to my aid. Let me mount you so that you may carry me away."

"That I cannot do," said the Crow, "for I can support only myself in the air. However, I can bring you sustenance that will enable you to make it out of the desert under your own power."

"Oh, please do then."

The Crow flew away with mighty beats of his wings. Princess Ordinary found herself disbelieving his professed inability to carry her, but what could she do about it? Soon he returned, bearing a bright red berry in his beak.

"Eat this," Crow said, speaking around the fruit.

"It won't do anything bad to me, will it?"

"Of course not!" replied Crow indignantly.

The Princess took the berry then and swallowed it. It was the sweetest food she had ever tasted. But as soon as it hit her belly, she knew she had done wrong. She was revitalized, but another thing had also happened. Placing a hand on her belly, the Princess cried out:

"Now I shall have a baby! You lied to me, Crow! You lied!"

But the crow just laughed and flew away.

Crawleigh felt sick. He threw the book across the room, hoping it would hit the wall and fall to pieces. But it landed safely atop a pile of shirts.

Audrey came back around midnight. She crawled naked into bed beside the sleeping Crawleigh and woke him up by straddling him and rocking against him until he was erect. Then she made love to him as if possessed.

The semester was over. Normally Crawleigh would have felt an immense relief and excitement at the prospect of a summer's worth of free time stretching ahead of him. But at the close of this semester he felt nothing but trepidation and unease. Nothing was going right, in either his personal or his professional life.

Regarding the former, Audrey had refused to see him since they got back from San Francisco and their aborted vacation. He

missed her more than he had ever imagined he would.

And for his current project—he was impossibly stumped by that damnable *Little Doors*.

He had finished reading the book. But he still didn't know what to make of it. That it was important—perhaps pivotal—to his thesis was no longer in doubt. He simultaneously blessed and cursed the day he had learned of it. But exactly what it meant was not clear.

The central nugget of mystery was contained in a single speech, at the very end of the book, by the one constant character in both Crawleigh's and Mitchell's versions of the story.

Professor Mouse.

With late May breezes blowing into his office, Crawleigh took the irritating book down from its shelf. It was long overdue, but he ignored the notices mailed to him. He couldn't give it up till he understood it.

Opening to a well-thumbed page, Crawleigh studied the central passage for the hundredth time.

"You claim," said Princess Ordinary, rubbing her swollen belly, "that I can leave this world only through a little door. Well, I would be glad to follow your advice—for this world has not treated me well of late, and I am anxious to reach another—but I am at a loss as to what a little door is. Do you mean something like the tiny door by which I entered your burrow? Am I in another world already?"

Professor Mouse curried his snout with his paws before answering. "No, my dear. I am afraid you have misunderstood me. A little door is not a physical thing, although it may very well manifest itself as one to your senses. A little door is more a twist in the universe that results from a state of mind occasioned by certain special everyday things which most people have come to take for granted, but which are really quite special."

"Such as what?" asked the Princess.

"Oh my, there are so many I could hardly name them all. But I'll tell you a few. February 29th is a little door, of course, just like New Year's Eve and the First of May. So are the four hinges of the day: midnight, six a.m., noon, and six p.m. Certain books are little doors, if read correctly, as are certain songs and paintings. Every mirror is a little door. Special smells and tastes that reach back to your childhood are little doors. Shifting dapples of sun and shade in the forest are little doors. Mountains are little doors, although to be sure they are quite big. Your birthday is a little door, and I daresay a full moon is one too. Cats with double-paws are little doors.

So is the call of a hunter's horn. A trunk full of memories in an attic could be a little door. And it is indisputable that love is a little door, as is memory. My goodness, I could go on and on."

Princess Ordinary tried to understand and did indeed feel herself trembling on the verge of some new knowledge. But still she had a question.

"You say all these common but uncommon things are little doors to somewhere else. Why then, I could have encountered any number of little doors back home, without ever having to undertake this dreadful, tiresome journey. Why have I never been able to, say, step through my mirror, as I have often wished?

"Ah, you lacked the key to a little door," the big Mouse said patiently. "You see, little doors do not always open when you wish. You must approach them with the proper state of mind. Your emotions and attitude are the key, and they must be strong. Serenity or desperation, desire for or aversion toward—these are some of the states during which a little door may open. I say, 'may,' since nothing is certain in this world, and many have wished for little doors to open and never been so lucky. And of course there are those rare instances when the last thing a person thought he wanted was to enter a little door, but it opened up and swallowed him anyway."

"So on this journey," said the Princess slowly and thoughtfully, "what I did was refine my desires until they were pure and intense enough to open a little door."

"Exactly," agreed Mouse.

A light broke upon the Princess then, making her look quite beautiful. "Then the quest was its own goal, wasn't it? And now I can leave your burrow and find my little door."

"Of course," said Professor Mouse.

And so she did.

Crawleigh looked up.

Audrey had walked in silently, and now stood looking at him.

Crawleigh felt two polar emotions. He had told her never to come here. But he was glad she had. Finally he adopted a cautious neutrality.

"Well, Audrey—what can I do for you?"

For a long second she studied his face, at last saying, "You've knocked me up. I forgot to take my pills with me to California, and now I've missed a period."

Crawleigh felt the world billow around him like a sail in the

wind. He grew nauseous, then unnaturally calm. What a stupid little slut, he thought. But I'll take care of her, out of the goodness of my heart.

"I'll pay for the abortion of course," Crawleigh said. "We'll have it done out of state, if you want, so no one will ever know. And I'll even come with you."

Audrey was silent. Crawleigh thought she hadn't expected him to take it so calmly.

"That's all you have to say?"

"Yes. What else could we do? Certainly not—"

"Damn you!" Audrey shrieked.

She ran out the door.

For a moment, Crawleigh sat shocked.

Then he followed.

Out on the quad, Crawleigh spotted her, still running. She was headed toward the arch.

Heedless of onlookers, Crawleigh took off after her.

"Audrey! Wait!"

She kept running.

Crawleigh gained slowly.

When Audrey got to within a few feet of the arch, the world inverted.

Crawleigh saw the huge arch shrink into insignificance.

At the same time, the painted door and the painted stairs at the base of the arch assumed solidity and reality as they swelled larger than lifesize. The stairs projected out into the quad, a luminous flight of veined marble. At the top, the hammered-silver door with its golden knob and iron hinges beckoned like a distillation of every forbidden door in every fairy-tale ever written or narrated.

From far, far away, Crawleigh heard the campus bells chime noon. A car horn sounded long and loud, dopplering away as in some dream.

Audrey had stopped. Crawleigh did too. They seemed the only people in the world. Crawleigh felt ageless.

Confronting Crawleigh, Audrey said, in a voice hushed with reverence, "It's happening, Jerry, it's really happening, isn't it? The big, good thing I always wished for. I guess I finally wished hard enough, or was scared enough, or something . . ."

Stupefied and fearful, Crawleigh could not bring himself to share Audrey's delighted childlike awe.

"Don't be a fool, Audrey, it's only some hallucination or delusion. I can't explain what's happening, but I know it's not real. There's no escape from this world. Stop running, and let's confront this problem like adults."

Crawleigh felt insane and deceitful, arguing so prosaically in front of this magnificent apparition. But he didn't know what else to do.

His imagination had failed him.

Ignoring her former lover's advice, Audrey moved to the first step. She placed one foot delicately on the surface, testing its solidity. When it held her, she brought the other foot up too.

She looked beseechingly back at Crawleigh, who averted his eyes.

Slowly at first, then with more and more confidence, Audrey climbed all the stairs until she stood at the top.

She gripped the golden knob.

Crawleigh heard the click of her painted nails on its metal. He raised his eyes to watch whatever would come next.

Audrey opened the little door.

A world too marvelous to be trapped in words revealed itself beyond. Its sky seemed to be gloriously on fire, and the radiance that spilled out the door made Audrey lambent. Crawleigh winced, and flung up his hands as if blinded.

Audrey turned to face Crawleigh. The sight had transfigured her plain features into something otherworldly.

She spoke softly. "It's so wonderful. Just what I always dreamed. Come with me, Jerry. Everything will be okay there."

Crawleigh shook his head, mute.

Audrey stepped through—

—and pulled the door shut.

Crawleigh fainted then.

And when he awoke, with the campus medics bending over him, he said:

"Audrey—"

But no one could tell him where she was.

Books

by AL SARRANTONIO

Watchers by Dean R. Koontz;
Putnam, 1987, \$17.95.

Dead in the West by Joe Lansdale;
Space & Time, 1986, \$6.95.

Cutting Edge edited by Dennis Etchison;
Doubleday, 1986, \$16.95.

Halloween Horrors edited by Alan Ryan;
Doubleday, 1986, \$12.95.

Popcorn time!

I suggest you make a big bowl of that exploding food, settle yourself into your favorite reading chair, pull the gooseneck lamp down over your shoulder so that it throws one hundred watts right onto the page, and, well, I suggest you read Dean Koontz's *Watchers*.

Watchers is, in the best sense of the word, a bestseller. It's got all the prerequisites of the modern mainstream bestseller—violence, sex, fast pace, brightly etched locales, identifiable good guys and bad guys, characters that don't ask *too* much of the reader, a story that keeps you interested—and it's got more. It's got the Frankenstein Factor: an ingredient that makes any horror or science fantasy story with a monster as the looming factor—and there are *two* in this book—successful. In fact, it's the only thing that *matters* in a story with a monster in it.

The dumb term Frankenstein Factor is mine, but the clearest definition of what it is comes from a recent review of Stephen King's *IT* by George Stade in, of all places, *The Nation*. (I hasten to add that a friend sent me the review; I'm not an inveterate reader of *The Nation*. As anyone who knows me will readily confirm, my normal periodical reading is stringently restricted to such newsprint gems as *Cracked* and *Farmer Yancy's Monthly Yuks*.) Stade says:

... literary monsters, those werewolves and vampires and lurching humanoids, are not scary in themselves; they are made horrific by the contexts that charge them with meaning. The Frankenstein monster, for example, depends for its effect upon the corpses of which it is constituted, upon the idealistic and fanatical doctor who constructs it, upon its murderous innocence, upon its violation of nature and domesticity, upon its sources in the Prometheism of science, which has exposed our collective gizzards to vultures. Similarly, the werewolf only gets to us when we are made to sympathize with the decent guy who wears this dog beneath his skin. . . .

If that's the Frankenstein Factor, then *Watchers* has it in bucket-fuls. I am not giving much away when I tell you that there is something called The Outsider in it, a human-engineered killing machine that makes its presence felt in the first few pages and becomes more fleshed out (if that is the term to use) as the book progresses. I don't want to describe the thing to you—I'll let Koontz do that if you read it—but there comes a scene in the middle of the book where The Outsider has left a lair behind, the mere description of which brings Dr. Moreaulike ("Are we not men?") heartbreak:

Most pathetically of all, a peculiar group of items was stored in a niche in the wall above the grassy bed. No, Lem decided, not just stored. The items were carefully arranged, as if for display, the way an aficionado of art glass or ceramics or Mayan pottery might display a valuable collection. There was a round stained-glass bauble of the sort that people hung from their patio covers to sparkle in the sun; it was about four inches in diameter, and it portrayed a blue flower against a pale-yellow background . . .

There are other things in the cave abandoned by this monster: a folded blanket, neatly smoothed-out candy wrappers, a pile of bones hidden in one corner as if the thing is ashamed of its own inhuman drives.

The Outsider is only part of the story; there is an intelligent dog named Einstein that is the main focus of the novel and who may cause some readers to fondly recall Clifford Simak's seminal sf series that eventually became the book *City*. And there are many other characters, mere humans, but I have to confess that I found the monsters far more interesting in this very interesting novel.

Let's hope you have some of that popcorn left for Joe Lansdale's *Dead in the West*, because it was his idea to pop it in the first place. In his dedication to the book he says:

This is not a book of "Big Thinks." It's a lot like the late night horror films you used to watch on television. To enjoy it best, let's make it windy outside. A limb is scratching against the window. Thunder is rumbling and you can hear the first patterings of rain. You bring in a big bowl of popcorn and a tall glass of soda, darken lights, turn on the TV, and sit on the couch . . .

How can you not respect a man for telling you exactly what you're going to get, and then giving it to you? If you take Joe Lansdale's advice, and take this one-hundred-nineteen-page novel—which may, by the way, be the first horror western since the 1966 film *Jesse James Meets Frankenstein's Daughter*—on the author's terms, then you can't help but just have a plain old good time for an hour or two like I did with this tale of Reverend Jebediah Mercer and his battle with the undead. There's also a heck of a nice bit of frontispiece artwork by Allen Koszowski showing a mounted rider against a background of cratered, bat-fronted moon and, off to one side, a discreet pair of zombie hands thrusting up from the grave.

Nice job all around, and Space and Time, being a small publisher, and therefore hard to find, can be found at 138 West 70th St., Apt. 4-B, New York, NY 10023.

You like necrophilia, patricide, castration, sibling murder, bondage, vivisection, dismemberment, incest, human sacrifice, sado- & masochism, disfigurement, infanticide, and, what the heck, more bondage?

Well, even if you do, put away the popcorn, because there's no way your alimentary canal is going to handle it while reading *Cutting Edge*.

I think it's time the horror field stopped waiting for the "Dangerous Visions of Horror." Kirby McCauley was supposed to have tried his hand at it with his mostly fine collection *Dark Forces*. Some may have thought *Cutting Edge* would be it.

It isn't.

No book can be.

Harlan Ellison put *Dangerous Visions* together in 1967 (My God, that's *twenty years ago!*) to help drag what was a Puritan, prudish, John Campbell- and engineer-dominated science fiction field into the middle of the twentieth century. To say the least, the science fiction field needed it. Here was a literature that espoused the future while restricting it to the mores of *It's a Wonderful Life*. Others, in their quiet way, may have started the revolution

(Heinlein and his curiously dated *Stranger in a Strange Land* come to mind), but Ellison, snarling and screaming, and with the help of a lot of good stories, kick-butted the whole genre a few decades forward. (There are those who would argue, perhaps Ellison among them, that the sf field has mostly stayed behind in Frank Capra territory, while most of the New Wave was coughed up and spit out of the side of the mouth into the gutter, to percolate eventually into what is now known as Cyberpunk—something that seems a dim shade of what was, but which might yet give birth to a Newer Wave. An interesting question, and one I don't have space to give serious thought to.)

But the horror field needs no *Dangerous Visions*, simply because most of the taboos that so long suffocated the sf field have never been in full force here. Indeed, Dennis Etchison himself, in his somewhat highfalutin introduction to *Cutting Edge*, talks of the modern horror movement as a safe harbor away from the blandness of the mainstream and restrictiveness of the other genres. His contention is that titles like *Whispers*, *Shadows*, *Terrors*, *Fears*, and the abovementioned *Dark Forces* have provided markets for, as he says, these "defiantly idiosyncratic stories that really do not fit the category as it has been known but which probably would have found no other home; many of the stories in these books have been like no others anywhere, stories which with rare power and immediacy addressed the ordeal of preserving our humanity through the rigors of 1984 and beyond."

In a way, he claims that the modern horror genre has become one big *Dangerous Visions*, publishing what can be published nowhere else.

Now there is a case for claiming that the horror field has been changed radically by such participants as Stuart Schiff, Charles L. Grant, and Kirby McCauley, and that, because of their efforts, and their *markets*, what appears now is different from what was printed a mere ten years ago. It is also certain that an amount of maturing, both psychological and grammatical, has occurred in the fiction presented to the public over that time. But, by using Etchison's own ground rules, *Cutting Edge* fails the test of uniqueness (again, it's an argument with foundation) he gives the field.

And *Cutting Edge* fails most when it tries hardest to be "experimental." The best stories—and there is some excellent work in here—could have been published in any number of places; Peter Straub's haunting "Blue Rose" (originally published in 1985 in a

limited edition), despite its grisly details, could have fit comfortably in *Playboy* or any of a number of mystery magazines; I could see Ed Ferman publishing Whitley Strieber's startling psychological meditation on humanness, "Pain," in F&SF without squirming too much. (If my argument fails it is probably here; "Pain" is a unique story, the first I've read on sexual domination that manages to be devoid of titillation—it's a serious story and one that showcases the specialness of the modern horror field.)

But in most cases in *Cutting Edge* experimental means just plain bad. The best of sf's New Wave rose to the top like cream, leaving most of the experimental junk behind. Not because it was experimental—because it was junk. It is no different here.

And again, many of these "radical" pieces, which merely go too far (too much gore, too much sex, too much fooling around with the English language—instead of providing the one thing we do need too much of: story) could have appeared in any number of places, especially in the science fiction field at the height of the New Wave.

When *Cutting Edge* presents good stories—and there are some gems in there by Ramsey Campbell, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, and others—no matter what the subject matter, it shines. When it tries only to push the envelope, which it does more often than not, then it explodes in your face.

Speaking of which (what a lousy segue), bring back the popcorn! Alan Ryan has put together a book of Halloween stories. I don't know about you, but I like Halloween stories.

There are, of course, thirteen pieces in the book, and, I'm told, there is a Volume Two to follow. I'm also told there is a paperback on the way for Volume One, so if you're unable to get your hands on the hardcover you can look for that. In keeping with the spirit of things, if I was a publisher I would bring that paperback out on Halloween of this year.

You'll find just about everything in *Halloween Horrors* eminently readable, but I found my favorites in work by Steve Rasnic Tem, Ramsey Campbell, Guy N. Smith, and Michael McDowell. And there is an absolutely hilarious story by Whitley Strieber, "The Nixon Mask," that is nearly as good, and hilarious, as anything Hunter S. Thompson wrote about the Nixon White House.

Another bowl of popcorn! Bring on Volume Two!

Film

by T.E.D. KLEIN

Blood balloons
are made for bursting.

Evil Dead 2: Dead by Dawn

Directed by Sam Raimi

Produced by Robert G. Tappert

Angel Heart

Directed by Alan Parker

Produced by Alan Marshall and Elliott Kastner

It was springtime in New York, a day for street-peddlers and strollers; but on your behalf, dear reader, I was spending the afternoon in the gloomy recesses of the Olympia Theater on 107th and Broadway, the sort of flea-bitten old movie palace often conjured up by the likes of David Schow or Ramsey Campbell. Brown paint hung in tatters from the walls, the plaster beneath seemed aflower with mold, the floor was sticky with ancient soda or some less savory fluid, and the man down the row to my right was immersed in the *New York Post*, which bore the headline VICTIM WAS FED TO SEX SLAVES. (You remember—that evangelist in Philly with the girls chained in his basement? The so-called “House of Horror”? Sure you do.) It was, in short, the perfect setting for *Evil Dead 2*, a house-of-horror film complete with prisoners in the basement.

Here's a précis of *Dead 1*, in the unlikely event that you missed it: “Five college students on a holiday, two boys and three girls, find a deserted cabin and an ancient book—a Lovecraftian Book of the Dead—that turns them into unkillable zombies, one by one, until only the film's star, Bruce Campbell, is left. The only

way to get rid of these zombies—the evil dead—is by dismemberment. Luckily a chainsaw is handy, and ..."

Those words aren't mine or the publicist's, and they aren't director Sam Raimi's, who made *Dead 1* at the ripe old age of twenty. They're Stephen King's, in the November '82 *Twilight Zone*. King had seen the film at Cannes earlier that year, and his encomium to it in *Twilight Zone* helped find it an American distributor; he was quoted on the poster, in fact, when the film was released here in 1983.

Sam Raimi is still in his twenties, but he's a whole lot richer today. That much is clear from the more polished and plentiful special effects he's packed into *Dead 2*. The movie opens with the close-up of a book, just like those old Hollywood versions of the classics, only this book has a squirming Claymationlike face on its cover and it's called—with a nod to Lovecraft—what sounded like "*The Necronomicon ex Mortis*" (which is a bit redundant, since both "Necro" and "Mortis" mean dead). Next we see a young couple driving through the woods toward—yep, it's the same sinister little cabin as the previous movie's, surrounded by the same swirling smoke (not fog or mist, mind you, but *smoke*) and the same spooky-looking trees. Remembering the first film, crude but effective, we brace ourselves for the horrors to come.

The driver of the car, we discover, is Ash, the hero of *Evil Dead 1*, and he's played by the same actor, Bruce Campbell, and—hey, wait a second, didn't this guy get killed at the end of the last film? It sure looked that way. So how come he's still alive? More important, how come he's coming back *here*? Doesn't he remember what happened last time?

Apparently not; as Santayana observed, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it"—and that seems precisely our hero's problem. He strolls into the cabin as if he's never seen the place before, spies the same tape recorder on the table as we saw in *Dead 1*, reaches for it—hey, hold it, Bruce, aren't you forgetting something?—and sure enough, the damned fool turns it on. Once again we hear a professor's voice reciting the spell to summon the dead; once again, out there in the woods, something awakens ... And before very long—in fact, with the movie not fifteen minutes old—we've been treated to a virtual reprise of *Evil Dead 1*, with Ash's girlfriend getting dragged from the house, killed by the demonic forces, and turned into a zombie, only to have Ash decapitate her with a shovel, bury her body in

the woods, and stick a cross on the grave—from which, nonetheless, she soon emerges, *sans* head.

It's clear by this time that *Evil Dead 2* is not the expected sequel to #1, nor is it that Tolkienian beast, a "prequel." Rather, it's *the same story all over again*, with the same setting, the same star, the same monsters, and the same director—a sort of variant version, a self-remake, with a bigger budget and better production values. Raimi, in a sense, is like a man with Alzheimer's who tells you an anecdote and, the following day, tells it to you again, only this time with a few more embellishments.

However, as in the old adage, history plays the first time as tragedy, the next time as farce—and so it is with these movies; for unlike *Dead 1*, *Dead 2* is played for laughs. The girlfriend's nude body, risen from the grave, retrieves her head and proceeds to dance a mocking, comic ballet, ending with a takeoff on *The Exorcist's* celebrated three-hundred-sixty-degree head swivel. (This time it's the head that stays facing us while the body does a spin.) The film later pays homage to the mirror gag in *Duck Soup*, can't resist a tasteless pun, and journeys into outright slapstick when Ash's right hand develops a malevolent mind of its own, slapping him and smashing a sinkful of dishes into his face in the manner of Strangelove and the Stooges. (Raimi is a known Three Stooges fan.)

The trouble is, once you've gone for laughs, it's hard to regain a sense of fear. By the time two more couples have descended upon the cabin, providing more meat for the carnage, the place has grown as goofy as Pee-Wee Herman's playhouse, for every prop has already come to life—rocking chair, creaking door, piano, clock, animated deer head (which talks), even a gooseneck lamp (which bobs and sways like something in an old Silly Symphony). It's like a Grand Guignol version of *Hellzapoppin'*: limbs are chain-sawed off; an eyeball goes flying through the air like a tiny Sputnik; corpses leap back into action, springing to life with jack-in-the-box regularity; bodies burst like blood balloons, spilling gallons of red stuff on the floor or spraying it water-main style. Campbell and company get tossed around like rag dolls, heads smashing through the cabin's breakaway walls and doors, but they seem as impervious to pain as figures in a Road Runner cartoon. It's all great fun, and done with admirable verve; but in the end cartoons tend to wear a bit thin. Sam Raimi is generous with his effects, but perhaps he's too fun-loving for his own good.

William Hjortsberg's *Falling Angel* seems to have been born under an unlucky star. An ingenious private-eye thriller with one foot in the supernatural, the book had the misfortune to be published during the fall 1978 New York newspaper strike, and the *Times* review of it did not appear till the following year—a delay which may have robbed the book of the bestsellerdom it deserved. Later, I'm told, a six-figure paperback deal was turned down in expectation of an even better offer; in the end, Hjortsberg had to settle for a mere fraction of that. On the book's original publication a Florida reviewer noted, "If some smart producer doesn't make a movie out of it, Hollywood is missing a good bet." It's taken a decade, but at last the novel has been brought to the screen by Alan Parker under the title *Angel Heart*—with, I'm afraid, the same disappointing results.

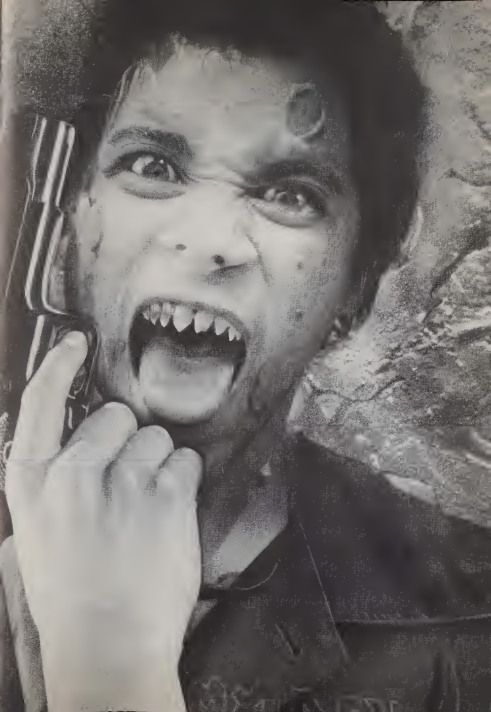
Yet it's hard to blame anyone; the performances, for one, are all first-rate. Mickey Rourke is an actor of limited range, but he's perfectly cast here as detective Harry Angel, the novel's wisecracking narrator, a grubby 1950s Colombo type who'll strike a match on the sole of a dead man's shoe. Rourke sports a perpetual two-day growth of beard, like Don Johnson or Yasir Arafat, and wears his patented tough-guy smirk, but beneath it he seems confused and a little bit frightened. Robert DeNiro makes an oilily sinister nemesis, and Lisa Bonet, as the love interest, is eye-catching in and out of a t-shirt. Trevor Jones's music is unfailingly ominous, and Michael Seresin's photography makes even sunny days look chillingly bleak.

Parker's screenplay stays respectfully close to the book, though as a dyed-in-the-wool New Yorker I think he erred in setting the second half of the film in New Orleans (the novel was set entirely in New York). Despite a few gruesome-looking corpses and some controversy over a sex scene, the events in the film are certainly no more shocking or lurid than those in the novel; at least we're spared the sacrificial murder of a baby in a New York subway tunnel. Instead, Parker has the skill to unsettle us with recurring images of stopped clocks, elevator wheels grinding like millstones, and fans whose blades mysteriously stop and change direction, as if time were moving in reverse.

Yet in the end the film lacks impact; the audience I saw it with seemed bored and confused. Everyone onscreen is curiously somber, even when discussing the most horrible mutilations and deaths. Even the final revelation, the news of whodunit and why,

seemed subdued when it should have been shocking—an odd failing for a director known for heightening the drama in films such as *Midnight Express*, *Birdy*, and *Fame*. Perhaps the film is simply defeated by the tired necessities of the detective-story format: the traditional series of interviews with suspects, acquaintances, and witnesses that in turn lead on to further interviews, punctuated by fistfights, beatings, chases, and the occasional corpse. Perhaps detective stories, with their natural orientation toward the past, simply work better in print. I only know that, even though I'd read the book, the hurried explanations at the end of the film seemed both babbled and baffling, and left my girlfriend and me arguing for the next forty-five minutes.

Here's a bit of movie horror for you: while right-wing columnist Dorothy Rabinowitz, on the prowl for patriotism, has claimed, of *Platoon*, that "There are moments in the film when audiences in fact explode into exactly the same responses *Rambo* inspired. A packed theater audience the other night applauded, *cheered*, when the enemy was shot. It applauded when the GI killer of civilians is punched by the good GI protector of women and children. Both these outbursts of patriotism, of course, square quite well with the national character and values"—yet Times Square audiences are reportedly cheering when the thugs of *Platoon* shoot an old woman and smash the skull of the village simpleton. "Kill 'im!" they cry. "Bash his brains out!" I can't help wondering, if they had been in Vietnam, whether they might not have done exactly that.



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